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CHRISTIAN COURIER

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Banner (left): Designed by John Knight, drawn to scale by Lowell Witvoet, made by Nell Witvoet, Sonya VanderVeen, Maria Kuntz, Anne Jonker, Ineke Bezuyen.

Christmas Greetings

Christmas greetings from Christian Courier's staff and columnists

The staff of Christian Courier would like to join with our columnists and other contributors in wishing our readers a wonderful, blessed Christmas. We hope you enjoy this special Christmas issue. Take time during this busy Christmas season to reflect on the perfect gift that God sent to us: Immanuel.

Here are greetings from our columnists:

Go to bank. Pay phone bill. Fix door. Make reservation. Renew insurance. Get new socks. My anal-retentive planner book reads a lot like that. It's full of mundane chores that need doing. It's those chores and more, though, that seem to consume my time. Somewhere above the din, I hope that I'll hear God. The problem is that I find that God often speaks in whispers.

If anyone would ask me what I love about Christmas, I would tell them right away that it's having a good time with family. Playing Rummy-O. Dusting off the *sjoelbak*. The brothers punching each other around in the living room. Euchre and snowmobiling in Ontario. Yet it's taken over 30 years for me to realize that I need to hear God in all the Christmas excitement. That all the fun, joy, love, and happiness that I experience (and not just at Christmas) comes from a Father who became one of us to save us from ourselves. That's huge. That's loud. It's time for me to hear it.

I hope God's amazing act at Christmas is loud in your ears this Christmas.

And always…

Tim Antonides

Have a Christ-centred, creation oriented Christmas.

Bert Hielema

The earliest Christmas I can remember occurred in the early 1970s when on Christmas Day, my mother informed me that my good friend, Brian Mole's house had burned down on Christmas Eve. Not only would Brian not be getting any Christmas presents, all he had left were the pajamas on his back. "Don't you think it would be nice to give Brian your Christmas present?" Of course, I was mad at The Mole for having his house burn down. His house burns down and I have to hand over my shiny yellow Caterpiller bulldozer with real rubber treads and a back-hoe that could scoop sand like a spoon. But later that day when I saw the blackened snow where what used to be Brian's house was smoldering, pride swelled inside me as I gave The Mole my bulldozer. My parents didn't lie, it did feel better to give than to receive. If you could have seen the smile on The Mole's face, you'd know what I mean. Merry Christmas to all Courier readers.

Ron DeBoer

May you enjoy holiday gatherings with friends and family, bright decorations and joyful worship services. But Christmas is more than the sum of its parts. Above all else may you experience *God With Us* during this blessed season and throughout the coming year. To those of you who have encouraged me in the year gone by - thank you. Your words are important to me. (May your Christmas tree stand straight!)

Heidi VanDerSlikke

Dear Readers: I'm sending all the students home to you for Christmas. They are yours for two weeks. Give them some good soup, warm mittens, and instill in them the confidence that home will always be a place where they get support for the journey. May your Christmas be a time of warmth, laughter, and home-made apple fritters.

Peter Schuurman

BUILDINGTRUST

As Christmas approaches we pause
for reflection
Jesus was born for our imperfection
We are in awe of that momentous occasion
And honor him with sincere celebration

The Building Trust column was started this year
Not without due trepidation and fear
As people we have a hard time adjusting to life
Gender role changes have caused some strife

But the column became a wondrous blessing
Women and men found the issues pressing
The column contributors' ideas were nourishing
The response of the readers very encouraging

We think of the people who meant so much
This past year they offered a loving touch
Sometimes we meet and then pass by one another
Blessed are we when we greet and touch each other

A meaningful touch we do not forget
Our hearts are enriched by that person we met
A word of kindness, at just the right time
Is a moment that offers us the sublime

Diane Marshall asked if women were human
Anne VanderHoek looked at the Bible for Women
Anne Van Arragon wondered if kids need attention
Bert Den Boggende's story merits a mention

Vicky wrote about women advisers to Synod
Janet de Groot could see much good in it
Herma Dunnewold told about growth and education
And the journey of personal transformation

Magda Misset described how Mary poured oil
On the feet of Jesus, causing turmoil
There are so many ways of looking at things
Stretching our minds and spreading our wings

One thing for sure that never does change
Is the truth in the Bible as God did arrange
We may look at the Bible a number of ways
In the end, God's true revelation it always stays

From it we gain courage, each day again
To work together as women and men
In love and appreciation for all God's great gifts
Trusting that God our burdens will lift

Building Trust is a concept with scope
It has loss in it, but also much hope
In healing and forgiveness we learn to embrace
Knowing that, really, it's all God's grace
Thank you to writers and those who did read
Also the Christian Courier, for meeting a need
To Harry der Nederlanden for steadfastness
To God for love, comfort and faithfulness

Vicky Van Andel

With warm wishes for a peaceful Christmas and a hopeful New Year.

CC STAFF PHOTO

Christian Courier*'s staff: from left, Natasha Postuma, Ineke Medcalf, Alan Doerksen, Grace Bowman, Harry der Nederlanden, Rose der Nederlanden. Ineke and Rose have been working part-time with CC, and will be working at the CC office on a regular basis in the New Year. We would also like to thank Kim Yungblut, who works tirelessly with mailings, proofreading and the Niagara Directory, and who wasn't available for this photo.*

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Editorial

You will be his witnesses.... (Acts 22:15)

Harry der Nederlanden

"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." (Luke 10:21)

This year's Christmas issue is loosely constructed around the theme of witness to truth. Just as all sorts of people are chosen to be witnesses to the birth of Immanuel, the Word made flesh, in the gospels, which are in their turn witnesses to the truth, so, too, the celebration of Christmas turns us into witnesses.

Truth seen as a prison-house

Truth has become a hugely contested issue in our culture, not just for philosophers and theologians but for all of us. We have become so sensitive to how much our claims to truth-speaking are slanted by time, culture, sex, race and class, and that such claims are often made out of a position of power and privilege and designed to preserve it, we have begun to suspect that truth is actually in the service of falsehood and illusion.

The Bible says, "You will know the truth and it will set you free." The postmodern mindset, however, suggests that truth is more likely a prison-house; it prevents us from knowing both ourselves and our neighbor.

The reaction by a large contingent of Christian leaders has been to assert the existence of an objective, transcendent truth. Many are seeking to recover the natural law tradition (or perhaps I should say 'traditions', for even here there are different versions). This has some resemblance to what Reformed thinkers call general revelation and normativity. What is right and true and good, says the natural law proponent, is inscribed in the very nature of things and is stamped in our very being. If we but open our eyes and use our common reason, we will discover that we are all essentially the same, or destined to become so.

CC FILES

The cradle of civilization

In the last couple of centuries we westerners saw ourselves as the cradle of civilization, and we expected all other peoples of the world to become like us as they smartened up, and we assumed that they were eager to do so, because ours was the way to truth and freedom, not to mention prosperity and happiness.

That's not the idea of truth that we should seek to return to.

That's not the truth that the angels, Mary, Zechariah and Simeon witnessed to (See pp.14 & 15). The universalist idea of truth strips each of us (and other peoples) of all that is unique in search of a sameness. That's why its ideal language was that of science and math, a language stripped of all music and voice, all emotion and evaluation, all creativity and artistry.

Truth-telling in Scripture

Kuyper in one of his reflective pieces pointed out that in Luke many of the witnesses to the fact, the historical fact, of Jesus' birth are songs. Yet, Luke, like the other evangelists, is not writing in a mythic or story-telling mode. He is intent on stressing the truth, the factuality, the historicity of Jesus' birth. That's why he trots out his witnesses. But truth-telling in Scripture does not ask us to put aside our unique selfhood or the deepest response of our heart or the artistic impulse God gave us. Rather, it calls them forth and enlists them in the proclamation and celebration of the central truth of history that (re)defines all truth – that God became flesh and did so because he is for us, not against us.

It is no wonder, then, that all through the ages Christmas, especially, has inspired artists, particularly poets, musicians and painters, to celebrate that truth with all their gifts and skills. Christmas is, thus, not only a celebration of God become man but also of the richness and variety of our created humanity, which is expressed most dramatically and concretely in the arts.

The Spirit of God raises up witnesses

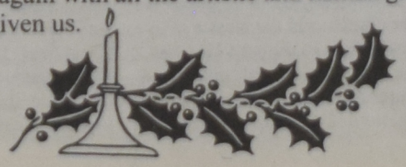
At the same time, though, the Bible writers make us aware that merely human perception and understanding are not enough. It is really the Spirit of God who raises up witnesses in the most unlikely places. The most humble are given voices, are given song, are surprised by joy, because God does not remain in heaven, distant, as a transcendent and objective truth, but he invades our time and our souls, and he melds himself with us, affirming and renewing our deepest desires, our most cherished longings.

Hosanna in the highest!

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. He is the light that shines in the darkness, and that light gives life to all folk. He is the truth that sets us free, the bread of life, the light of the world, the firstborn of all creation, the bright morning star.

Hallelujah!

Merry Christmas. May your house and your heart resound with the joy and music of this season – a season that stretches from then till now, a time God gave us to witness to his coming and coming again with all the artistic and human gifts he has given us.



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News

Christian agencies publish Christmas catalogues with a difference

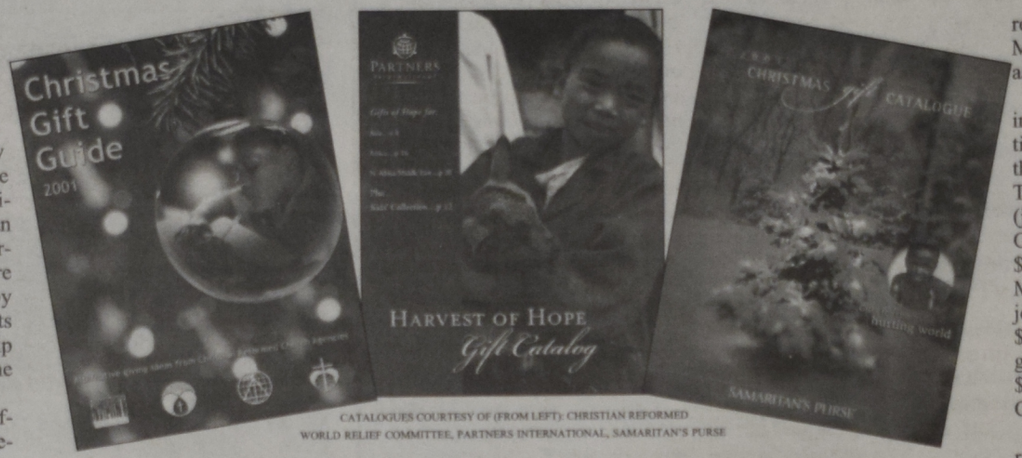
Alan Doerksen

BURLINGTON, Ont. — Christmas is coming, and many Canadian Christians are busily shopping for gifts for their friends and families. Meanwhile, many Christians in other countries are living in need of physical or spiritual help. Therefore, the Christian Reformed Church, Partners International and Samaritan's Purse are working to meet these needs by sending out catalogues of gifts which people can purchase to help out needy people around the world.

"Christmas shopping with a difference" is how the Christian Reformed Church refers to its Christmas Gift Guide. The guide offers alternative gift-giving ideas from four CRC agencies: the Back to God Hour, Home Missions, World Missions, and the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC). Each page of the guide offers brief descriptions of gifts with color photos to illustrate many of them — much like you would see in a Christmas catalog from a department store. But what's offered are not new video-games or the latest battery-powered toy. Instead, each gift relates directly to the ministry offering it.

For instance, the Back to God Hour, which operates the CRC's broadcasting ministry around the world, offers a year's worth of Chinese/English *Today* devotional booklets for $2. The catalogue explains, "Young Chinese people are eager to learn the English language." The devotional "provides the opportunity to learn English and to learn about Jesus Christ at the same time."

World Missions offers gifts such as one sheep for a Malian woman for $30. "The first-born lamb is given back to the project, which then helps another woman," explains the catalogue. "Animal husbandry provides an outlet for relational evangelism with Muslim people."



CATALOGUES COURTESY OF (FROM LEFT): CHRISTIAN REFORMED WORLD RELIEF COMMITTEE, PARTNERS INTERNATIONAL, SAMARITAN'S PURSE

Spiritual literacy on campus is one item offered by Home Missions. A donation of $15 will pay for a book that CRC campus ministers can distribute.

Goat pills

CRWRC offers some unusual items, such as goat pills. In sub-Saharan Africa, some goats die of parasites or liver disease. "Goat pills" — medication priced at one dollar for 10 pills — help Africans raise healthy new herds of goats.

The CRC has produced this gift guide because "we want to make giving tangible for people," explains Marcia Mantel, communications administrative assistant with CRWRC in Canada. Rather than just making a general donation, people can personalize their gifts. Illustrations offer a glimpse into the ministry of each CRC agency. A wide price range allows kids to give, too, Mantel observes.

Rather than only giving presents to friends and family, people can give on behalf of someone else to an agency, says Mantel. This is a good alternative because "Christmas has become so commercialized.... There is so much already that we have." Giving to those in need can remind us of "the selfless gift of Christ himself."

Many areas of the world are represented in the catalogue, says Mantel. "We try to keep it as broad as possible."

"This is the 4th year of the giving guide as an interagency initiative," explains Mantel. "Before that it was only a CRWRC piece. The first year as a joint venture (just World Missions and CRWRC) brought in around $15,000. The second year, Home Missions and Back to God Hour joined in and the giving went up to $27,254. Last year, the giving guide brought in $42,763 (almost $26,000 of that went to CRWRC)."

"There's been an encouraging response. It's been growing year by year. It's benefited a lot of people."

Mantel acknowledges that other agencies, such as Partners International, have also received a good response from such catalogues.

Harvest of Hope

Partners International is an agency that focuses mainly on church planting and evangelism in the 10/40 window. But this year, Partners has published a "Harvest of Hope"catalogue, which focuses especially on the physical, humanitarian needs of people in South Asia and northern Africa, explains Rev. Brian Lise, Partners'

See **GIFTS** *page 5...*

Conversations Among Churches spark new ideas in Canadian CRCs

Alan Doerksen

BURLINGTON, Ont. — Grassroots involvement is a key element of Conversations Among Churches, an initiative started this year by the Christian Reformed Church in Canada that encourages churches within a classis to learn from each other, support each other, and brainstorm for new ministry ideas.

Each classis-sponsored "Conversation" event allows churches, through some of their leaders, to learn from one another; find ways to support each other; identify high-need ministry areas and start to work towards common goals; be encouraged by one another; and be equipped with new ministry ideas, according to the CRCNA website.

Everyone enthusiastic

"I have learned more about the other churches in the classis in one evening than in the past 10 years," Derk Maat, chair of council at Community CRC of Meadowvale, Ont., told CC. Maat and others

COURTESY DERK MAAT

Derk Maat

from his church met last May with representatives from other Classis Toronto CRC churches — along with William Veenstra and Ben Vandezande, from the Canadian CRC offices in Burlington, Ont. — for a Conversation Among Churches. The event was "very well-attended. Everyone was enthusiastic about it," said Maat. He saw the main purpose as being "to come to a consensus on where the church is going."

At the event, "each person gave a testimony on what they thought was meaningful" in the area (such as worship and prayer) which they represented. "We talked about what churches should try to be in the future — what we should preserve from the past and what to avoid."

One priority Maat sees for the church is "equipping and training the body to become intercessors." Prayer ministries are one of the main focuses of his church.

Maat appreciated the way the evening was run, and says that his church has used similar structures for its leadership retreats. The Conversation event was effective because "it connects people hungry for change," he asserted. "The people who want change often feel isolated in churches," but such events help these people make connections. "It gives them renewed vision and ideas to take back to their churches." It is important to follow up the Conversations with action, so the momentum won't be lost, he emphasizes.

Maat has recently been appointed to a "ministry of renewal" within Classis Toronto.

At each Conversation, participants include six to eight people per church, according to the CRCNA website. Along with the pastor, those selected from each church will represent an area in which they provide leadership for their congregation:

a) worship/prayer;
b) evangelism/outreach/missions;
c) pastoral care/congregational life;
d) children/youth ministry/young adults;
e) adult education/leadership development;
f) diaconal ministry/stewardship/justice.

In addition, representatives from the classis, and the denomination and its agencies are in attendance to listen and observe what local congregations have to say.

Listening to people in pews

"Our design was to make sure the people in the pews are heard," said William Veenstra, Canadian Ministries Director for the CRC, who has been involved with each of the Conversations held so far. The process "finds its genesis in Synod '97," he told CC. Synod '97 envisioned the Conversations as happening every three years. Planning began soon after that synod, and the first Conversation was held last April 6 in Classis Huron. Eleven Conversations have been held so far, including Classis Toronto May 11, and Classis Eastern Canada Nov. 17.

Each Conversation is "designed to help us hear what's happening in churches at the local level," explained Veenstra. "What ministry has God been blessing?" Each session involves discussions about the six main focuses mentioned above, as well as an exercise about what to "achieve, preserve, and avoid."

See **CHURCHES** *page 5...*

News

'Gifts for a hurting world' offered by Christian agencies

... continued from page 4

vice-president for development. This is the fourth year Partners has published this catalogue.

One gift offered this year is a goat for a poor family, for $50. "Many of them go to pastors' families, where the pastor is in jail," says Lise. "It's really a lifeline for the pastors' families." The families can get milk or meat from the goat, or sell it, if necessary. Last year, 1,800 goats were given away, thanks to Canadian and American donors, reports Lise.

Some of the Harvest of Hope gifts focus on spiritual needs. For instance, $40 will pay for a "mini-library" for a pastor in China. It includes hymnals, theological booklets, and writings of renowned Chinese Christian leaders to encourage and nurture a pastor.

Lise believes Canadians can be too materialistic at Christmas time. He comments on the "garbage" for sale in stores, and "the toys that someone plays with for half a day" before tiring of them. In his family, says Lise, "we spend about $500 on Christmas. We decided to send half of it to the Harvest of Hope." In Canada, "many of us are caught up by advertising on television," he says. "Happiness is about giving," not about materialism and spending on oneself, he responds.

Lise has traveled to countries such as Brazil on work projects, and tells of the gratefulness people show for the gifts they receive. One pastor in Brazil was "grinning from ear to ear" because of a new set of sneakers he had received from North American donors.

A lot of churches make a project out of buying gifts from the Partners catalogue, explains Lise.

Samaritan's Purse helps impoverished people

Samaritan's Purse is well-known for Operation Christmas Child, in which individuals can fill shoeboxes with toys, clothing and health items for children in developing countries. But the agency also publishes a Christmas gift catalogue, subtitled "Gifts for the hurting world."

This catalogue features gifts to help out children trapped in poverty, the persecuted church, community development, healing ministries, crisis response, and evangelism. Prices range from $12 to feed a malnourished baby for a week, to $15,000 to build a church in India. Recently, Samaritan's Purse worked with the Evangelical Church of India (ECI) to meet the physical needs of people in 11 villages in northwest India hit by a massive earthquake, the catalogue explains. Now the agency wants to minister to the spiritual needs of these people by setting up new church buildings.

"We have many churches which choose a project they identify with," explains Ivan Giesbrecht, who works with the agency's communications department in Calgary. "We want to give people an opportunity to see some of the projects we're doing and donate to [a] project."

Christians and non-Christians alike are guilty of spending too much on gifts for themselves and their families, observes Giesbrecht. "We certainly have a lot. We're a blessed nation." But he notes, "Canadians, when presented with a need, are quick to respond." Regions of Canada which are "economically-stretched," such as the Maritimes, tend to give more than other areas, he says.

Giesbrecht sees the catalogue as being effective. "People like the color pictures. It's simple and to the point — it's easy to read. It's an easy way for people to do some Christmas shopping."

Churches discuss what to achieve, preserve, or avoid

... continued from page 4

All churches in a classis are represented at a Conversation by several members, says Veenstra. Each session lasts only two and a half hours. But despite the brevity, participants such as Maat have given glowing reports about the results.

Sometimes the Conversation is connected with a Day of Encouragement, run by Diaconal Ministries Canada. That's what happened in Truro, Nova Scotia, where a Conversation was held November 17 with churches from the three Maritime provinces.

"It was very well-planned... very positive in sharing best practices," asserts Elna Siebring, clerk for All Nations CRC in Halifax, and an event participant. It was "uplifting to share with others what we're doing."

Participants wrote down all their ideas, posted them on walls, and then placed dots next to ideas they approved to give their "amen," explains Siebring. The process was "totally" useful in helping churches come together to share worthwhile ideas. The event also helped the isolated Maritime churches think more collectively about the CRC denomination. "It brought unity, which is one thing people said they wanted to achieve.... It was very effective. We came up with new ideas."

Shortly after the Conversation, All Nations church planned to hold a retreat, which would use a similar structure, reports Siebring. The Conversations are "a process that's worthwhile for local churches to do," she observes. Siebring recently began working part-time with her church as a community networking co-ordinator.

National follow-up event

The results of the Conversations Among Churches will be summarized and shared with the classis and its sponsoring committee. It will be up to each classis to distribute that material to the churches and the participants, states the CRCNA website. The report can then be used by local congregations and the classis to follow up on ideas, themes, and suggestions within that report. In addition, it will be used as input into the agenda of the national Canadian Ministry Forum.

The Canadian Ministry Forum is a national event scheduled for May 30-June 1, 2002 at The King's University College in Edmonton, Alberta. At that event, "We'll bring in all the information we've gathered," explains Veenstra. A report will be written touching on the main themes dealt with in the various Conversations. Don Posterski, Vice-President of World Vision Canada, will be a guest speaker at the May conference, and will share his insights about the Canadian Christian scene, says Veenstra.

Recommendations made at the national forum will go to the CRC Board of Trustees — Canada for consultation and input into the denomination's Strategic Ministry Plan.

Next May, Maat will be among delegates going to the conference in Edmonton. One result he would like to see is "a common vision of where the Lord is leading the CRC in the next few years."

Operation Good Thing helps Toronto's homeless

COURTESY YOUTH FOR CHRIST/YOUTH UNLIMITED

Volunteers load Operation Good Thing packages onto a van.

TORONTO — As Christmas fast approaches, most of us are busy preparing to celebrate. There are gifts to buy, baking to be done, decorations to be put up and family times to be planned. But for many in Toronto, Christmas is just another day. To the homeless and less fortunate, Christmas becomes a time when they realize what they are missing — a warm house, a family, someone to love. For many, it can be a very depressing time.

For the past eight years, Youth Unlimited has been organizing a project called "Operation Good Thing." This project brings immediate care and hope to the downtown core of Toronto with dignity, and creates awareness, awakes compassion and sparks meaningful action from people who want to make a difference, according to a Youth Unlimited press release. Operation Good Thing tells the homeless community that they are cared for.

Last year, Youth Unlimited had the opportunity to help more than 300 individuals through Operation Good Thing, by distributing "street packages" through a partnership of several downtown agencies. These partnering agencies include Yonge Street Mission. The Salvation Army, Sketch, Sanctuary, Evangel Hall, The Scott Mission, Ground Level Youth Cafe and First Nations Gospel Assembly.

Friendships and follow-up care

For the people each agency works with, the project allows for friendships to develop and for follow-up care. Each person who receives a kit is known to the agency and involved in some way with their programs.

Interested individuals who want to participate in Operation Good Thing have four options to choose from. Option One includes purchasing the Starter Kit (containing a duffle bag, Bible and detailed instructions) for $20 from Youth Unlimited. Then they go out and purchase the contents to complete the kit. Contents include a new sleeping bag, gloves, hat, disposable flashlight, soap, brush, toothbrush and toothpaste, a Christmas card, candy cane, chocolate bar and fast food gift certificates and involves a cost commitment of about $130.

The second option is to provide Personal Pack Sacks for individuals. Pack sacks (containing a small pack, Bible and instructions) cost $10 each, and are to be filled with socks, underwear, brush, toothbrush and toothpaste, travel tissues, soap, and the like. This sack will cost someone $50 to complete.

The other two options are donating new sleeping bags or making a financial gift which will be used to provide immediate care for youth in need. The items are precise and have been put together in consultation with our city's most experienced street workers.

Operation Good Thing ensures that people in need feel valued and loved, says Youth Unlimited. It also provides an opportunity for participants to experience the joy of giving. It makes for a meaningful family or group project or ir could take the place of an office gift exchange.

To order starter kits or pack sacks or to obtain a brochure, interested people may call Youth Unlimited's automated hotline at 416-383-1229, ext. 308.

A taxi ride in Manila

Helping us celebrate Christmas more wisely

Louis Tamminga

Manila, June 2, 2001. I wake up early this Saturday morning in a Manila hotel where I have spent the night following the retreats at Cagayan de Oro on the island of Mindanao. The sessions went well but I have no time to think about that now. I have places to go.

In the early afternoon I will fly from Manila to Kuala Lumpur and from there on to Amsterdam. And I have things to do before boarding the plane. I must find a taxi which will take me to the office of the Malaysian Airlines where I will pick up my tickets and from there proceed directly to the Manila Airport. The airport is in a different direction.

I quickly go to the rooftop restaurant of the hotel, eat my breakfast while overlooking an immense city already come to life. It is still cool but the haze toward the horizon promises another sweltering day.

Taxi drivers know a lot

Descending 13 floors, I quickly traverse the hotel lobby, face the heat outside, and wave down a cab. Someone told me that taxis in Manila are not very safe, whatever that meant, but my driver seems a nice enough man. I make small talk. I like to talk with taxi drivers. They know a lot.

He tells me his name is Santos. I tell him with some exuberance how wonderful a name he has: "Santos" — "the holy one." Yes, he knew all about that.

I tell him that "Louis" means "famous in battle" and we congratulate each other with our fine names.

Via the meaning of our names we get to talking about religion, and he tells me that he belongs to the Assemblies of God Church, though he had been brought up a Roman Catholic. "Assemblies of God is a good church," I say. He agrees.

Santos has a wife and three children. I ask him how business is. He shrugs.

How many fares does he expect to have today. He shrugs again.

Will he earn enough to put food on the table for the little Santos children? He smiles, frowns, and says that he hopes so. Yesterday, he says, he had one fare.

I feel uneasy. Poverty is a multifaceted evil. I am a Westerner. I can talk about poverty but it's always at a distance. I have never experienced poverty, never missed a meal, never been unemployed.

We come to the office of the Malaysian Airlines. Santos agrees to wait for me in an empty lot behind the building. I make my way inside. But the woman behind the counter tells me that the tickets have to be made out yet, and that all the other people sitting there are ahead of me.

"How long will it take?" I ask. "Good half hour." I know she means one hour. I pick a number, go outside and propose to Santos that I pay him now, and take another taxi after I get the tickets.

Santos disagrees. He will wait, no problem.

I hesitate. I am a frugal person. To sit in an office while the taxi meter keeps running is not my idea of a good time. On the other hand, Santos is a nice man, he is now my only friend in this very alien city. I agree, Santos will wait.

We are happy

An hour later I return. Santos and I, we are happy. We talk and drive many miles. He assures me we are still in time for my plane. And, sure enough, there we swing into the airport area, nicely in time.

Santos is a little man, but very strong. He lugs my suitcases inside, knows where I have to go, keeps talking and laughing all the while.

"Santos," I say, "how much shall I pay you?" He and his taxi have now invested close to three hours in me.

"Would 400 pesos be O. K.?", Santos asks.

I quickly calculate. That's about $8.00. I say, "Santos, you need more, you can't drive a taxi and feed the little Santos children for just eight dollars."

Santos is confused: He thinks I object. "Would 350 pesos be O.K.?" he counters.

And I hate myself. I am a colonialist, an imperialist, a Western capitalist. I can spell out conditions, I have the power, all he can do is accept. I also realize that economic differences between my world and Santos' world are complicated.

So I tell myself: I will pay Santos the minimum wage of my country, pay him for the taxi, and add a dollar for each of the three Santos children. That made that Saturday a very lucky day for Santos. And why should Santos not have a lucky day?

Santos pumps my hand. He wishes me blessings. And I wish him well. And he shakes my hand again. Then he makes his way out of the airport; before going through the revolving door he waves at me.

His face gives me a warm feeling. Nice to leave Asia on a happy note.

But then it occurs to me that I did charity and that the rich do charity and that I daily live at the expense of the Third World's gentle people, and that a hard working man like Santos deserves better than to be poor.

I find my gate, presently enter the plane, and behind me a sprawling city with all its struggling millions slowly glides into the haze of another hot day.

Teaching a tree to talk

Creation waits...
John Wood

Our speech with trees is mainly economic. We converse with these creatures in board feet, cubic metres, hectares and other quantitative terms. Foresters talk of fibre, fuel load, the fall-down effect, and other arcane terms. Closer to home we make mulch for the garden, or landscape the yard. We form them into power poles and fence posts, boardwalks and bridges. The price of softwood lumber is a matter that makes headlines. And from writing pads to wrapping paper the weight of our commerce is supported by wood. Leaf, bark and bean — fruit, nut or Neem (oil), these tree parts are vital for our nutrition, health and pleasure. When extracted this way from the forest, it is hard to see a tree as anything other than dumb matter. And this is almost the only way most of us see trees.

WORLD BOOK PHOTO BY DAN MILLER

A Christmas tree decorates a church service.

What do we do with Christmas trees?

The words Christmas and tree are like Santa and Claus or baby and Jesus. They go together easily at this time of year. During the holidays, our tree language may become less economic and more emblematic. We sometimes talk of the symbolism of the evergreen, and it helps us celebrate redemption, the remarkable grace of God given all creatures in Christ's birth. When Christmas is over we carry out the tree to be burned (not so common today), buried in a landfill (still too common), or mulched for compost. Or, if we have purchased a live tree, we might carefully plant it outside. But in all this we seldom speak of Christmas trees as creatures (some children's stories excepted). And even less do we seek to speak to the trees as fellow creatures of the earth.

Teaching means listening

"Speak to the trees?" This sounds like a line from the Dr. Seuss book, *The Lorax*. "Anyway," we might say, "I would not know what to say, or how to say it. I don't speak 'tree', and they don't know how to talk to me." Yet how we converse with the Christmas tree in our home, and all trees, for that matter, is important. In the early 1970's Francis Schaeffer, put it this way, "Fellow creature, fellow creature, I won't walk on you. We are both creatures together." For the most part, we have been slow to recognize what Schaeffer, and others, like Joseph Sittler, were saying to us. We need a responsive, interactive relationship with other creatures. We cannot hope to sustain ourselves in the modern world if we continue cutting off this vital connection. And the first step in renewing our communication with creatures is learning to listen.

Most people favor trees because of their beauty. Trees add value to our lives by their form (shape, height, density) and color, and by the wonderful aroma and texture of bark and leaves. I love the changing smells that trees lend to the seasons. The physical sensation of warm and cool as you walk in and out among trees and the play of light and shadow are all richly stimulating. Remarkably these properties do not arise simply from individual trees alone in isolation. They come from complex biotic relationships.

Each individual is part of a complex ecological web. From a single tree within a stand, to the entire ecosystem, the relationships can be surprising. In a recent issue of the journal Ecology researchers described the puzzle of wild plants responding to human touch. For reasons that are not yet clear, merely approaching these plants was enough to trigger a rise in the intensity of insect feeding damage. This is a wholly unexpected result to minds prepared to think of plants as merely unresponsive matter. We know that in the process of feeding on leaves, bark and roots, herbivores shape the aesthetic properties and population dynamics of trees. Deep in the soil fungi form intimate associations with tree roots called mycrorhizae. This benefits trees by increasing water and nutrient uptake. Scientists still have not fully untangled this jumble of complex relationships. Listening to the creature-messages from trees will enrich our lives.

Shh, I am speaking

Trees are humble beings. But if we stop to look beyond the products we make of them, we find individuals full of beauty, grace and even speech. Or, so we would, say many thoughtful people, if at least we tried. From author Annie Dillard (in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,* and *Teaching a Stone to Talk*) to professional forester Marianne Karsh (Arborvitae: **www.arborvitae.org**) they are urging us to see nature in a relational way. The biggest challenge in teaching a tree to talk is in quieting our own hearts enough to listen. Will it take an act of God to break the grip of rationalism on our minds? Perhaps we should ask a tree.

John R. Wood teaches environmental science at The King's University College, Edmonton.

Christmas/Psychology

The Christmas beggar

A true story by Sylvia Carlson Grosh

I sat up with a start. The morning sun was already streaming in my window. It seemed to be cheerier than normal. And the birds were singing louder than normal. I pushed back my curtains and stared out my windows.

Even the grass outside seemed greener than normal. There was a lovely expectancy in the air. It was Christmas day! I dressed quickly and tiptoed to the living room. Dad was already up, sitting in his easy chair, reading the Bible.

"Morning, Dad," I greeted quietly, "Merry Christmas!"

He returned my greeting thoughtfully, "Merry Christmas, honey." Then he turned his attention back to the Word. I figured he was probably preparing a Christmas devotional for us.

I studied him. His face was kindly, marked that way by so much giving and so much loving. For almost 30 years now he had been in full-time mission work.

A special missionary

We lived in the jungles of Peru where he and Mom were involved in mission work. Dad was a special missionary. All the nationals knew him and came to visit him. Perhaps it was because he seemed to understand them so well, or perhaps it was because he had so much love to give them. So many came to him that it was impossible for him to remember all the names. But he would invite them in just the same, offer coffee and crackers, sit and visit, listen to any troubles they might have, pray with them, and help meet their needs if possible.

But today was Christmas, and we would get Dad all to ourselves.

We had plans for the day. We would have a special family time alone all day. That morning we would cook Christmas dinner. It would take a bit longer for us than for our stateside friends because we had to do everything from scratch.

Lovingly-made gifts

Then we would enjoy the dinner. Then, after dishes were done, the gifts! We usually made our own gifts for one another, so our time of opening them was extra special. I had secretly collected beautifully-patterned jungle leaves, set them at the top of blank paper, and lightly splattered paint on the paper with a toothbrush, creating a jungle-stationary. I was sure my family would be pleased with my lovingly-made gifts.

After a family breakfast of special homemade Christmas rolls, Mom and we girls got down to business in the kitchen. We put Christmas music on and sang carols as we worked, each of us anticipating the looks of pleasure on the faces of the various family members as they opened the gifts we had made.

Soon things were put together for dinner, and we were able to sit back while things cooked. We gathered in the living room, chatting, reading, crocheting, and just generally enjoying ourselves.

Of all people!

After only a short time together, we heard murmurings and rustlings outside. I looked out the window and groaned. Of all people!

There she came marching right up to our door. Her face was set, determined as ever. She had a "Pity me or else!" look about her.

She was a Shipibo Indian woman from the village down the river. All the other women made an honest living there, and she was just as capable, but she had decided it would be easier to live by begging. But she did even that poorly. She demanded rather than asked. She was a needy person — emotionally more than materially. Her adopted lifestyle had turned her into a sour, unpleasant woman. We enjoyed almost all our other visitors, even those that had to ask for help with money, but not her.

"Beggar Lady is coming," I announced with a groan, "and she is bringing her whole brood with her." There went our carefully planned Christmas day!

"Invite her in," Dad said.

I opened the door and the whole lot of them filed in. We brought out extra chairs and Mom put on water for coffee.

Dad politely inquired how everyone was, and at that point, to my dismay, the rain came. It wasn't just rain, it was a tropical downpour. Rain thundered down on our

Continued on page 19...

EMIL MUENCH

"Beggar Lady is coming," I announced with a groan, "and she is bringing her whole brood with her." There went our carefully planned Christmas day!

Healthy families find meaning in celebrating Christmas traditions

Getting Unstuck

Arlene Van Hove

The world of advertising heralds the coming of the Christmas season with the sights and sounds of happy families unwrapping colorful and tantalizing gifts beside sparkling trees or in front of cozy fires.

Some of us enjoy the innocence and simplicity of these depictions. Others cringe at their superficiality. However we perceive them, healthy families do find meaning in rituals and traditions and take the time to celebrate them. At the same time, celebrations ought to be more than just "spending quality time" with loved ones.

The villager and the alarm bell

Rabbi Beuven P. Bulka once told the following story:

"A simple villager witnessed an amazing event during a visit to the big city. When a fire erupted, someone simply pressed an alarm and a full complement of fire trucks soon arrived and quickly extinguished the blaze. The villager returned home, excited that he had found the desperately needed solution for his community's ongoing problems with putting out fires. All they had to do was to put in an alarm bell.

The other villagers became equally excited when they heard how well a fire alarm works, and they immediately installed one. Soon afterwards, a fire broke out. No one worried; they simply pressed the alarm. Hearing it ring, they felt fully confident that it signaled the beginning of the end to the fire. But nothing happened. No fire trucks, no hoses, no water. By the time the villagers realized that the alarm did not work, it was too late. The house had burned to the ground.

The disappointed villager who had proposed the alarm system was instantly transformed from hero to villain. Desperate to find out why the alarm achieved nothing, he went back to the big city, and spoke with the fire chief. The villager was told what we already know — that fire alarms work only if they are connected to a fire station equipped with people and trucks to respond to the alarm. An alarm with nothing else only makes noise; it does not douse flames."

The vital link

How many of us make the same mistake as the villager when it pertains to our own little village — the family. We eagerly, if not desperately, seek the magical ingredients that will bestow a blessing on the marriage and on the family. We sift out the things that seem to bind families together, place them within our own families, and then wonder why they do not work.

In other words, for marriages or families to gain meaning from celebrations of rituals or traditions there must be more to it than just spending "quality time" together. Both the marriage and the family needs to fit into a *larger* context. For instance, when the ritual or tradition actually embraces *religious* tradition then the family members are provided with more than just pleasant memories. They acquire a spiritual anchor and a foundation on which to build a future.

When we understand this link, we will see Christmas as an important time to celebrate tradition. Then it *can* be about happy families, colorful and tantalizing gifts, sparkling trees and cozy fires because we are rooted in the real meaning of this season — the joy of the birth of Christ who was faithful and redeemed us all!

Arlene Van Hove is a psychotherapist with Cascade Christian Counselling Association in Surrey, B.C.

Afghanistan's 24 jailed aid workers all set free

Barbara G. Baker

ISTANBUL (Compass) — In the last phase of a dramatic rescue operation, U.S. military helicopters airlifted eight Western Christian aid workers out of Afghanistan before dawn to November 15 safety in Pakistan.

The covert operation ended a tense 48 hours since their Taliban captors had headed south from Kabul three days earlier, taking the eight prisoners with them toward Kandahar.

The safe release of their 16 Afghan co-workers of the Christian Charity, Shelter Now, arrested with them had also been confirmed.

Taliban refused access, information

The Taliban regime had refused any access to, or information regarding, the Afghan staff, although sources in Kabul had been told last month that Taliban investigators had found no evidence against them and would be releasing them soon.

From Germany, a spokesman for Shelter Now confirmed to Compass that three of their jailed Afghan staff had been released and crossed into Pakistan earlier. Others have telephoned their Peshawar office in northwest Pakistan to confirm they had been freed, the spokesman said.

BAPTIST PRESS NEWS PHOTOS

Dayna Curry, top, and Heather Mercer were among the aid workers recently freed in Afghanistan.

Shelter Now's eight Western and 16 Afghan staff had been jailed in early August on charges of spreading Christianity among Afghan Muslims, a capital offense under the Taliban's harsh Islamic rule.

'Incredibly good news'

Calling the rescue of the eight Westerners "incredibly good news," U.S. President George W. Bush expressed his gratitude to everyone in Afghanistan who helped with the operation.

The covert rescue operation included cooperation from opposition Afghan soldiers, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and the U.S. special forces.

According to senior U.S. administration officials, the Taliban militia had in fact agreed to release the aid workers and turn them over to the ICRC. But the plan collapsed when advancing opposition troops caught up with the retreating Taliban, who abandoned their prisoners and fled.

Earlier Wednesday, the son of Libyan leader Moammer Gadhafi had predicted they would be set free soon, claiming the Gadhafi Foundation for Charitable Organizations had been negotiating with the Taliban for about two months to win their freedom.

The group's German director, Georg Taubmann confirmed that their captors retreating from Kabul Monday night wanted to take them to Kandahar, the southern stronghold of the Taliban. "We knew if you end up in Kandahar, you would not survive there," Taubmann admitted.

A terribly cold steel container

As they fled in the early hours of Tuesday, Nov. 13, he said, the Taliban locked them in a "terribly cold" steel container, with no blankets until morning, before transferring them to the jail in Ghazni, 50 miles southwest of Kabul. Taubmann described the Ghazni jail as the worst of the five prisons they'd experienced during their three-and-one-half months of detention.

Almost immediately Ghazni came under heavy bombardment, and in the battle for control of the town, their Taliban guards fled. When Afghan fighters broke into the prison shortly afterwards and opened the Westerners' cells, the eight thought the Taliban were taking them off to Kandahar.

"We were really scared," Taubmann told CNN, "and then the [Northern] Alliance people came in, and we were free. We got out of prison and we walked through the city, and the people came out of their houses and hugged us and greeted us, and they were all clapping," Taubmann said.

According to an ICRC representative in Islamabad, a local military commander in Ghazi had contacted Red Cross officials on Tuesday. Explaining that his troops had rescued the Western prisoners, he asked for "help to arrange for their transportation" to safety. They remained under the protection of Northern Alliance troops, and a day later, U.S. helicopters came under cover of night to ferry them out.

According to an ABC report, the three U.S. Special Operations helicopters which picked up the eight in a field near Ghazni about 2:40 a.m. local time were guided to their destination by small fires. The American women had lit their head scarves, afraid that the helicopters would not see them.

"It was dramatic up to the last minute," Taubmann said. "We had almost given up that the Americans would find us. But then they did.... It was like a miracle."

Aid workers urge foreign political intervention in Afghanistan

Paul Jeffrey

PESHAWAR, Pakistan (ENI) — Church-sponsored aid workers here on the border with Afghanistan say time is running out for the international community to prevent a bloodbath inside Afghanistan.

"We need a massive influx of troops, not under the guise of protecting humanitarian aid, because we know best how to do that, but rather to simply stand between the warring armies and stop the country from falling into chaos," said a European church worker here who asked not to be identified.

Reluctant to make public political statements

While church workers on the Afghan-Pakistani border are not afraid to speak openly about relief operations, many say they are reluctant to make public political statements because they have to carry out their work in a treacherous political landscape..

In this dusty frontier town filled with more than a million Afghan refugees, aid workers fear they are about to watch history repeat itself. Following the ouster of the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, the country was torn apart by civil war.

Aid workers say the ethnic Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara warlords of the Northern Alliance, who have taken over several cities inside Afghanistan, are not very different from the Taliban, who came from the country's large ethnic Pashtun population.

"They are the liberators of Kabul today, just as the Taliban were the liberators of Kabul five years ago when they freed people from the grasp of the guys who form the Northern Alliance today," said Geir Valle, director of operations here for Norwegian Church Aid.

Valle argued for a rapid intervention by armed United Nations troops rather than U.S. and British soldiers. "The UN has more legitimacy and would be more acceptable to more Afghans at this point," Valle told ENI. "And the British have been thrown out of Afghanistan three times in the past. Do they want to be kicked out a fourth time? It's always good to take a lesson from history."

Valle said he thought former King Zahir Shah, who lives in exile in Rome, had the best chance of bringing feuding Afghans together around a common political project. "It's time to give the king a chance," Valle said.

King favors council of tribal elders

The king favors calling a council of tribal leaders to craft a political solution. He is more acceptable to the majority Pashtuns than former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik, who is now in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. Rabbani said that the British presence in Afghanistan was not unwelcome, according to reports.

Shiite Muslims in Kabul are particularly worried about Rabbani. Karim Khalili, the leader of the Shiite faction in the Northern Alliance, has marched his 3,000 troops to the edge of the capital to bring pressure on Rabbani to share power. Khalili has called on the UN to send peace-keeping troops, something Rabbani opposes.

"It may be too late already," lamented another aid worker, noting that Northern Alliance troops have demanded the removal of British troops from the Bagram air base north of Kabul. "We may have come too far down the road towards the ethnic factions re-establishing control at a local and regional level. The warlords want the foreign troops removed so that they can further consolidate their hold on their little pieces of turf."

Warlords rushing to take control

The aid worker said it would be best for the intervention force to be multilateral in nature, but acknowledged that hammering such a force together may take too much time. "And time is one thing we don't have now. The warlords are rushing to take control of as much territory as they can."

The United Nations put together a conference of Afghanistan's many ethnic groups in Berlin to address the political future of the country.

According to Masoom Stanezkai, director of the Agency for Rehabilitation and Energy Conservation in Afghanistan, a central task of an international force would be to disarm the warring factions. "For ordinary Afghans, ethnicity is not a problem if the guns are put away," Stanezkai told ENI. His organization is supported by Action by Churches Together (ACT), the Geneva-based international network of church aid agencies.

Afghans need to own the solution

According to Julia McDade, the representative here for Christian Aid, a British organization, a key element to resolving the conflict is whether the Afghan people will perceive a negotiated solution as something that has emerged from their own troubled political culture or something that has been imposed from outside.

"If the people can own the solution that the international community is brokering with Afghan leaders, then they will reject the Arabs and the others who supported the Taliban, and turn them in," McDade said. "But if their sense of hope for the future is squashed, then the Taliban will be given a chance to reorganize. This solution has to come about soon, or the suffering of the people will be prolonged."

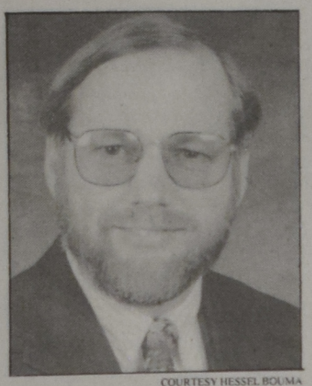
Calvin prof reacts to cloning announcement

Phil de Haan

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — The Associated Press is reporting today that President Bush "decried" a research company's claim to have cloned the first human embryo. "We should not, as a society, grow life to destroy it," Bush said. According to the AP, the president told reporters during a Rose Garden appearance that the reported breakthrough by a Massachusetts research firm was '"morally wrong, in my opinion."

Calvin College biology professor Hessel Bouma III, a medical ethicist who has testified before a Congressional committee on cloning, agrees with President Bush. "This epitomizes both science leaping ahead of ethics and the inherent dangers associated with privately-funded and largely unregulated research," he says. "I do not believe the 'therapeutic cloning' work can be ethically justified at present and may further complicate the already morally laden embryonic stem cell research which it is purporting to assist."

Presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer said the work of Advanced Cell Technology in Worcester, Mass., amounts to human cloning and lays bare "the conundrum of scientific progress, where progress can also be measured in terms of how many lives will be taken to save a life. That's something the president has drawn a strong ethical line in the sand on and said that line should not be crossed."



COURTESY HESSEL BOUMA

Calvin Professor Hessel Bouma

Advanced Cell Technology announced Sunday that its researchers had cloned a six-cell embryo in hopes of developing genetically compatible replacement cells for patients with a range of illnesses.

The Massachusetts company's lab procedure would be banned under anti-cloning legislation passed earlier this year by the U.S. House but stalled in the Senate.

EFC wants ban on human cloning

On the same issue, in a letter sent to the Canada Health Minister Nov. 26, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) has asked the government to move immediately to ban all forms of human cloning. "Human life is not a commodity to be designed and perfected upon, and human life should not be used as a means to some other end," said Bruce Clemenger, Director of the EFC's Centre for Faith and Public Life.

"Human cloning is contrary to a commitment to the sanctity of human life."

Last May the health Minister tabled draft legislation on Assisted Human Reproduction with the Health Committee. The bill as drafted would ban both therapeutic and reproductive cloning.

Christmas Knights

Gordon Legge

CALGARY – It began with a simple act of generosity. Since the later 1970s, however, the Magic of Christmas has made Christmas magic for countless Calgarians.

In fall of 1979, Bob Johnson's wife, Nancy, entered a nursing home with Multiple Sclerosis. At Christmas time that year, Johnson wanted something to do with his two young girls, aged 5 and 7, to take their mind off their mother's absence.

On Christmas Eve, Johnson dressed up as Santa Claus, and along with his two daughters serving as elves, visited a neighborhood family who were going through a rough time. He delivered some Christmas cheer and presents. The visit made a difference.

A year later, he visited half-dozen families. Johnson was a member of the Knights of Columbus, a men's fraternal order at St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church. A few years after he started making the visits, the Knights became involved and the program quickly grew to the point where it was incorporated as an all-volunteer, non-denominational society in 1991.

In 1994, the program received international recognition from the Knights. Last year, about 150 volunteers — many of them Knights and their families — used six transit buses and spent about 18 hours on Christmas Eve visiting more than 2,800 people in shelters, hospitals and nursing homes around the city.

As well, a rural Magic of Christmas now makes the rounds in towns southwest of Calgary.

Spread the love, caring and sharing

"Our motto is to spread the love, caring and sharing associated with the most joyous time of Year," says former society president Charles Russell, who is a past Grand Knight at St. Patrick's.

Johnson died last year but his legacy lives on both within the Knights and the city-at-large. Russell chokes up when he talks about the lives that have been touched by the two projects.

Several years ago, Russell, dressed up as Santa, and together with Brian St. Germain, past Grand Knight at Holy Spirit Church council, made the rounds at the Foothills Hospital. In one unit, they visited a woman in a wheelchair. The pair, together with St. Germain's wife and three children, sang Christmas carols and gave the woman a teddy bear.

As they were leaving, Santa and his elves hugged the woman. The stuffed animal dropped on the ground. St. Germain's wife picked it up and handed it back to her.

"Who's that?" the woman asked, pointing to Russell.

"Santa Claus," St. Germain's wife answered. "I love Santa," the woman responded.

The nurse accompanying Santa on his rounds broke into tears. "That is the first time the lady has spoken in three years," said the nurse.

St. Germain is now president of The Magic of Christmas.

Doctors look to religion in making euthanasia decisions

(Religion Today) — Religious faith helps determine whether a doctor will intentionally hasten a patient's death, according to a university survey and as reported on smh.com of Australia. In the wake of the Newcastle University survey of two-thirds of Australian surgeons, in which one in three has acted illegally by intentionally speeding up the death of a patient with high-dose painkillers, doctors have called for a national review of euthanasia laws.

However, when the surgeons were asked if they would administer whatever drugs were necessary to keep a patient comfortable, even if it "incidentally" hastened the patient's death, religion played no part, with all Jewish and more than 92 per cent of other religions cited saying yes.

Crossing a legal threshold

Deliberately hastening the death of a patient by giving them higher doses of painkillers than needed to control symptoms, is illegal in all states, and those who did so "crossed a legal threshold and, according to some, a moral threshold," the report's authors concluded. But prosecution would be unlikely because the dose given slowly through a drip was a matter for the doctor's clinical judgment.

One of the authors said the report showed the extent to which surgeons were "operating in a climate of fear" because there was no guidance on how they should negotiate such decisions. He urged the Australian Law Reform Commission and Australian Health Ethics Committee to open the issue for public debate.

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Christmas

The Third Christmas

Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

HARRY DER NEDERLANDEN ILLUSTRATION

Snow drifted onto our verandah the week before Christmas. As I watched it swirl, I remembered my sister Trisha, her belly swollen, crossing the verandah's creaking boards through crisp-crunchy leaves before the arrival of winter. Mom had wearily walked beside her, carrying a brown overnight bag. Dad, his shoulder sloping, had lugged a turquoise suitcase that always stood in our hall closet.

"Where are you going?" I had asked Trisha when she walked into the kitchen. Then I saw her bruised cheek. "Did you fall?"

"I'm coming home," she said flatly.

Dad had set down the suitcase. "She's decided to press charges against Ricky," he said wearily. "I'm calling the police now."

"Charges?" I asked. "What happened?"

Mom had put her arm around my shoulder. Then Trisha had melted into our circle, too. Her taut baby-belly pressed against my arm as her tears fell on my sleeve. The baby kicked vigorously. Never before had I felt anything so joyful while sadness rained down on me.

Mom had led me to the living room. "This is going to be hard for you to hear, Justine," she said cautiously. "Twelve-year-olds shouldn't have to deal with this garbage." Mom had sighed, then continued. "Trisha never told us that Ricky drank too much alcohol and yelled at her on the days his job didn't go well, or when his old truck broke down, or whenever he was in a bad mood. In her mind she's constantly defended him, reminding herself of how loving he is when he's not drinking. But tonight he pushed her against the fridge and punched her."

Mom's tears flowed freely. "She finally realized she had to leave."

I hugged Mom, terrified of the evil that had shattered Trisha's life. And mine.

* * *

In the time between the falling of leaves and the falling of snow Trisha's son was born. I loved Brennan fiercely.

And I hated Ricky. My hatred grew as I watched Trisha breast feed Brennan, change his diapers, and cuddle him. Without her husband.

One evening after Brennan's birth, I heard Dad and Mom talking in the kitchen.

"Cancel Christmas!" Dad urged. "Everything is too much for you now. Writing the liturgy. Having Matungulu for supper on Christmas day. Decorating and cooking. And helping Trisha with Brennan."

"Cancel Christmas?" Mom said in what I recognized as her backbone-voice. "Oh, Bill! I won't do that! We need to celebrate Jesus' coming to us more than ever before!"

From where I sat on the stairs I saw Dad get off his chair and tenderly take Mom in his arms. They swayed slightly. Their crying combined in what seemed to be a prayer of lament.

I fled to my room, shaken by their grief.

How could Ricky do it? I wondered as I lay on my bed. How could he break the marriage vows we witnessed as sunlight poured through our church's stained glass window, illuminating Noah's ark under the rainbow's promise-filled arch?

Then a thought hit me. I shoved it away. No, it couldn't be true! I would not think about it. But I did, over and over again till I could no longer deny it. I had fallen in love with Ricky, too, in my own twelve-year-old way. It's not that I really loved him. He was Trisha's husband. It's just that I wanted my future boyfriend to be like him. I began to understand my hatred for Ricky. He had let Trisha down. But he had let me down, too. My thoughts embarrassed me. I would never tell them to anyone.

* * *

Whenever Mom had time, she escaped to her office upstairs to write her annual Christmas liturgy for our family. Once I came in to call her to the phone. Papers and a Bible, commentaries and pens littered her desk. A half-empty tissue box stood by her computer, the rest of the tissues a soggy mess in the garbage can. I glanced at the screen. "Christmas Means." That's all she'd written.

What does Christmas mean this year? I thought dejectedly.

"That was Matungulu," Mom said when she came back. "He wondered if we still wanted him to come on Christmas day since we're so busy with Brennan."

"What did you tell him?"

"Of course we do!" Mom smiled at me, but her eyes were sad.

I thought about Matungulu, our Congolese friend. Mom met him through her work as a deacon at our church. He's a refugee waiting to receive his landed immigrant status, and he hasn't seen his family for a long time. They escaped from the Congo to South Africa in the back of a truck, and hope to come to Canada some day to be with him.

Whenever Matungulu visited us, I felt happy. I'm not sure why. He was the most-suffering person I ever met, missing his family the way he did, losing his job as a professor because of his political beliefs, and escaping his homeland. I heard him tell Mom once, "I'm not looking down at my tired feet. I'm looking up to the Lord."

* * *

When Matungulu arrived at four in the afternoon on Christmas day, he insisted on helping us set the supper table. He liked doing chores with us. Jobs which annoyed me were family gold to him. Like peeling potatoes. And washing lettuce. Or drying dishes.

"Please light the candles, Matungulu," Mom said as she put the turkey platter on the table between the scalloped potatoes and fruit salad.

"My pleasure," he replied solemnly as Mom handed him matches.

When the candles flickered, Mom said, "Let's eat."

While Dad prayed, Brennan cried, not like a chick peep-peeping, but howling like a wild storm. Dad said amen. The adults chuckled at Brennan's persistence, but Trisha didn't smile. His bawling made her nervous, and I could understand why. She wasn't used to being a mother yet.

"I'll sit with Brennan in his bedroom," Trisha said, "so the meal will be peaceful."

"Please don't!" Matungulu insisted. "Crying babies are a part of life! May I carry him?" he asked. Trisha handed Brennan to Matungulu. "It's the third Christmas," he said over the baby's wailing, "since I have seen my wife and three children. Holding this little one helps me remember my sons and daughter."

While Dad passed the turkey platter to me, Matungulu rocked Brennan and crooned a lullaby in French. After a few minutes, Brennan heaved a long, shuddering sigh and his eyes drooped shut.

Concluded on page 11...

Media/Christmas

Harry Potter issue among Christians refueled by movie's theatre blitz

Tobin Perry

LOS ANGELES (BP) — Among Christians, it seems, Harry Potter has become one of the most controversial pre-teens in history. Since his entrance into pop culture in the late 1990s, Christians have often debated Harry's spiritual ramifications.

With the new *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* movie now in theatres, the dialogue has gained new steam.

Some examples:

— Charles Colson, on his daily radio commentary Breakpoint recently, said he wouldn't recommend children watching the new Harry Potter movie. Knowing that many children will see it anyway, he urged parents to teach children to be discerning.

No reference to God in Potter story

He said he doesn't believe the Harry Potter books and movie show witchcraft in the same way as C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. In C. S. Lewis' classics, Colson said, the story takes place in a clearly allegorical world where archetypes of God the Father and Jesus still show final authority, while the Harry Potter story has no reference to God.

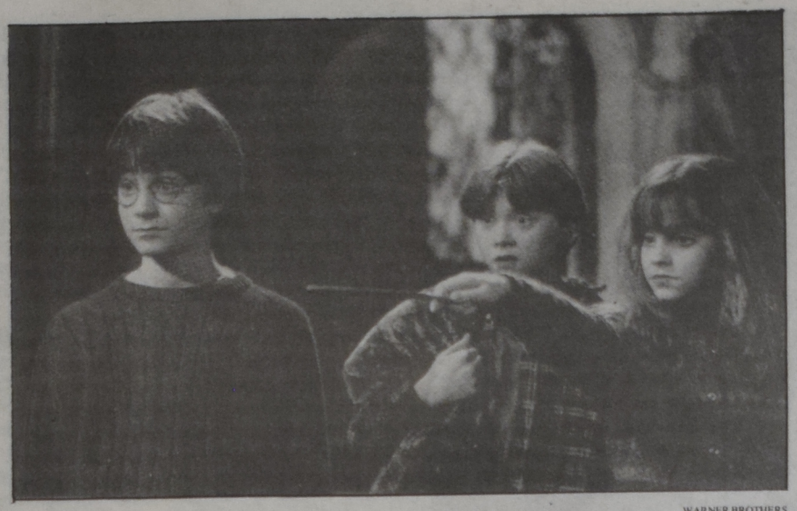
On the Breakpoint website, Colson also gives a brief list of classic children's literature that parents can offer their children as Harry Potter alternatives.

Colson received attention in the evangelical community early in the Harry Potter phenomenon when he told his radio listeners in 1999 that the magic in Rowling's books was "purely mechanical, as opposed to occultic." In the same broadcast, he told listeners that the characters in the book show "courage, loyalty and a willingness to sacrifice for one another — even at the risk of their own lives. Not bad lessons in a self-centered world."

Also in that broadcast, Colson did encourage listeners to contrast the "mechanical witchcraft" show in the Potter books with the witchcraft condemned by the Bible.

— Ted Baehr and Tom Snyder, Christian movie reviewers who produce an entertainment publication called Movieguide, rated *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* as "abhorrent," the lowest possible moral acceptability rating on their movie review scale. Baehr and Snyder describe the movie as presenting a deep occult and pagan worldview. They also chastise the movie for showing a "works-based theology" where those who are more successful at doing magic are considered the best children. Another of Baehr and Snyder's complaints is the ethical system the movie represents in which gossip and disobedience are honored. At the end of their review, they give parents 17 questions to help them guide a discussion on the movie with their children.

"The bottom line," Baehr and Snyder suggest, "is that God abhors witchcraft no matter how sweet and subtle it is."



WARNER BROTHERS

Harry Potter (left), played by Daniel Radcliffe, with two other first year Hogwarts students.

Besides their review, Baehr and Snyder also produced a parent's guide to the movie that both helps educate parents on the movie's dangers and helps them educate their children on the movie.

— Gary Grant, owner of Britain's largest independent toy retailer, has refused to sell Potter merchandise, losing an estimated $750,000 according to a story posted on the *Christianity Today* website. "I have to uphold my Christian values in my private and public life," Grant told London's Daily Telegraph. "The Bible is quite clear: Avoid that which even appears evil. It doesn't say avoid only that which is evil."

Later in the Daily Telegraph article, Grant said he wasn't against the Harry Potter books, but didn't like "the concentration of sorcery in the merchandise." Grant also has stopped selling other items he feared would spread the occult since becoming a Christian 10 years ago.

What we like about Harry

In January 2000, *Christianity Today* wrote an editorial titled, "What We Like About Harry Potter," praising the book series. In the editorial, the magazine stated that Harry Potter books "have almost no resemblance to the I-am-God mumbo jumbo of Wiccan circles. Author J.K. Rowling has created a world with real good and evil and Harry is definitely on the side of light fighting the 'dark powers,'" the magazine said. The *Christianity Today* article also described the books as a "Book of Virtues with a preadolescent funny bone."

— Focus on the Family's entertainment guide, Plugged In, cautions parents against allowing their children to watch the movie. The movie doesn't revolve around a consistent Christian worldview, Plugged In states, and the movie's witchcraft theme may subtlety raise curiosity among children about witchcraft.

— Christian author Connie Neal doesn't try to persuade Harry Potter critics to change their mind, but she does present a Christian assessment of Harry Potter. She also shares in her book, "What's a Christian to do with Harry Potter?" how Christians can use the book to teach their children positive moral lessons, and how they can use the book to share their faith.

On her website, **www.connieneal.com**, she offers an evangelistic bookmark called, "So you like Harry Potter?" She also offers a Christian parents' movie guide to help parents guide a discussion on the movie with their children.

Neal's book has been featured on the Focus on the Family website.

Art Toalston contributed to this article.

The Third Christmas

... continued from page 10

Puffs of breath escaped his lips, puckered into a tiny O. When he slept, Trisha took Brennan to his crib in the next room.

"The third Christmas," Matungulu repeated, as he scooped potatoes and turkey on his plate. "The reasons are so complicated. Politics. Bureaucracy. Greed and power. But mostly because people have broken their promises again and again." He paused. "But what am I doing? I'm looking down at my tired feet." He smiled at Mom.

"On the third Christmas we will look up to the Lord, Matungulu," she said in a steely voice. "For your sake and the sake of your family." Just then Trisha came back. "And for all our sakes," Mom added.

"Thank you," Matungulu whispered.

* * *

After eating our meal Mom said, "We have a family tradition."

"They are good things," Matungulu asserted, "because they weave muscle into a family's body."

"Each year I write a Christmas liturgy for our family. We sing songs together and read parts."

"I am honored to share your tradition with you," Matungulu answered.

Mom handed me a copy of the liturgy. "Will you be the leader this year, Justine?"

"All right," I answered, surprised. While she handed out the rest of the liturgies and assigned everyone a part, I read the title: "Christmas Means God is True to His Word."

When everyone had a copy, I began to read.

Sing a Christmas song of praise!
Why?
Because God is true to his word.
He always does
what he says he'll do.
He acts in history
and carries through on promises
from age to age;
prophecies fulfilled
on the Bible's pages.
Listen! Hear the prophecies
that were written for your benefit.
Rejoice because of what God,
the Promise-Keeper,
has done for you.

Then Trisha read from Genesis about the offspring of Eve crushing the serpent's head, and Matungulu read Isaiah's words about the virgin birth. We sang about the herald crying in the desert far and near, and about the Branch of Jesse's stem coming to his own and rescuing them.

Dad's voice grew husky as he recited: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

Mom paused and looked at each of us, then read her part, "Because of your great love, God, no circumstances can remove a year-round celebration of Christmas from our lives. Thank you for being true to your word and sending Jesus to save us."

I glanced at Trisha and Matungulu in the flickering candle light. Then I understood. Broken promises existed everywhere. In nations. In marriages and families. And in me. Because hadn't I promised God last year at summer camp, when life seemed perfect, that I would always love people? And didn't I hate Ricky?

But God never broke a single promise. Not even once. That's why we can celebrate Christmas this year, I thought.

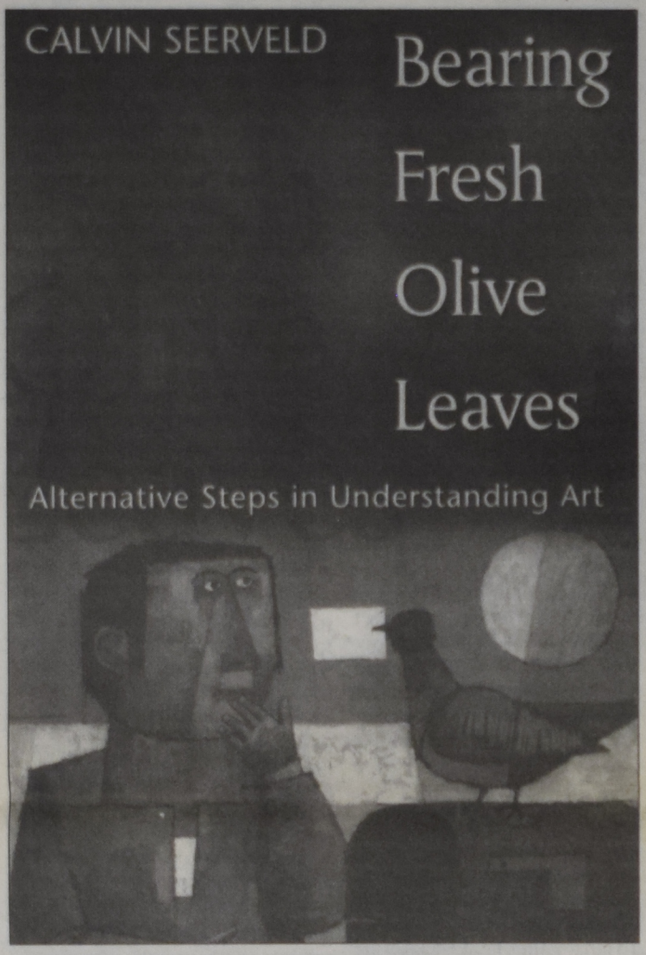
I heard Brennan cry again as Trisha said the final prayer.

"Like I mentioned earlier," Matungulu laughed, "crying babies are a part of life."

"I'll get him," I offered, and ran to pick up Brennan.

Book Review

Artistry and arts are gifts from God, writes Seerveld



Harry der Nederlanden

The Christmas season. Our homes and churches resound with some of the most beautiful, rich and edifying music ever written and performed. It's one of the main reasons my wife and I look forward every year to the Christmas season. The radio stations that carry classical music begin dipping into their repertoire of choral music much more often, and we bring out our modest collection of Christmas CDs to play them over and over.

At Christmas even the most stern and ascetic Calvinist (or Lutheran or Evangelical) acknowledges heart and soul the importance of music, and hence of art, in our expression of joy at the meaning of God-with-us. However, what we acknowledge and delight in so unabashedly at Christmas, we tend to deny, at least practically, during the rest of the year.

The rest of the year we tend to treat the arts as a frill – something we can easily do without. For some of our parents, we may remember, it was closely allied with wasting time, at least, if it was reading a novel, listening to music, drawing or painting pictures, or writing poetry.

Of course, we've been (glad to say) quite inconsistent in our appreciation of the arts, for we Calvinists eagerly embraced the pipe organ (associating it, I suspect, with the powerful resonance of the Almighty's voice), and Psalm-singing was a hallmark of the churches of the Calvinist Reformation (though some might argue that this was the displacement of art). Anyway, we need not apologize too abjectly for our past.

Gifts of God and callings

No one has been more active – and exemplary – than Calvin Seerveld in stressing that artistry and the arts are as much gifts of God and callings as are worship and devotion, good work and good works. He has been a leader in Reformed and Evangelical circles not only in teaching us how to appreciate and understand the arts but also in calling for a Christianly liberated art as well as in inspiring young artists to create truly nuanced, meaning-full art that sprouts from Christian soil.

Toronto Tuppence Press and Piquant (a small, Christian publisher in the U.K.) have joined to publish two new books by Calvin Seerveld: *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves: Alternative Steps in Understanding Art* and *In the Fields of the Lord*, the latter edited by Craig Bartholomew. The latter collects articles and speeches on topics ranging from art to labor, from education to historiography. Some of these were published when I was still in college, and they've exerted a profound and lasting influence on my life. Many CC readers will remember such titles as: "Christian Workers Unite!", "Labor: a Burning Bush", and "Cultural Objectives for the Christian Teacher", but although I've always collected Seerveld's monographs, this book contains many pieces that I've never seen before, including several songs never before published. The excellent introduction by Craig Bartholomew and Gideon Strauss gives not just an overview of Seerveld's life but also of his thought.

Honed collection of essays

Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves is a "honed collection of essays" given in cities from the U.S.A. to South Africa and Spain. Although there are a number of short essays on the arts in *Fields*, the bulk of Seerveld's more recent, and more extensive reflections on the arts are bundled in *Olive Leaves*. They build on his *Rainbows for the Fallen World* but do not presuppose an acquaintance with that work. Most of them are popular lectures and you don't have to be an academic to understand them.

In the opening lecture, Seerveld elaborates on his theme that art is not a means to an other end, to evangelism or moral nurture, say, but is something God wants us to do as part of our all-around cultural mandate to do all to his glory. He writes: "Food, sanitation, medicine and artistic joy all belong to the bouquet of gifts God has given us human creatures. Art has been appointed by God to bring nuanced cheer to the neighbor, and as it fulfills that mission it may also exercise and direct our ordinary sense of daily style into a more imaginative faithfulness to the Lord, just as so-called 'preventive medicine' may reform and reinforce one's obedience in keeping a more healthy diet for oneself and one's neighbors."

Christian art is not 'church art' or art that deals with explicitly 'sacred' subject matter; it moves us indirectly to sense God's norms for the renewal of life and nudges us almost imperceptibly to repentance and beyond to praise and joy. He makes this point in "The freedom of the Christian artist" to keep the church from imposing external, strange demands on the Christian artist, demands that will constrict his ability to create good art. In the next essay, "Artists in society: understanding their task", he develops this further, exploring how the present status of the artist – as outcast — came about historically. He proposes how artists can be reintegrated into the community.

A sensitive guide

The two well-illustrated lectures, "Trend in modern and postmodern art – and alternatives" and "Redemptive artistry in contemporary culture" give us Seerveld as a sensitive guide to understanding developments in especially painting in recent times. He counters the yearning among Christians for Beauty in art (with a capital 'B'), which he sees as a "Platonic drive to escape from our troubles and conflicts by simply leaving behind this world of history which we have messed up, [to cling] to an other-worldly ideal of perfection."

The title of the book is taken from the "Redemptive artistry" essay, in which Seerveld writes: "By 'redemptive art' I do not mean capital-A 'Art that will save you'. Or 'Art that will lift you up for the grand mountain-top experiences of faith'. I mean something much closer to what the dove did for Noah in the ark. Noah was wondering whether the punishing flood had receded and the earth was now habitable again. The dove came back bearing fresh olive leaves, a token that the faithful Lord was giving new life on earth after the awful judgment on world sin."

These books should be part of every CC reader's library and also of every church and school library. They'd make great Christmas gifts for a university student interested in the arts.

Seerveld's books can be ordered directly from the publisher: Toronto Tuppence Press, 332 Senlac Road, Toronto, ON, M2R 1R3 or email ttp@icscanada.edu

Fans of Seerveld and Hans Rookmaaker will be pleased to hear that Piquant Press is also publishing the Complete Works of Rookmaaker in six volumes. You can save a pile of money if you order them prior to publication. Write to IVP, Norton Street, Nottingham, NG7 3HR, UK or by email: info@ piquant.net

Artwork from Seerveld's book: Thomas meeting Christ again, *by Ernest Barlach (1926).*

Advice/Family

Holiday healing: Coping with grief at Christmas

Lisa M. Petsche

During this time of year, most people are filled with joyful anticipation and festive good cheer. But some are filled with anxiety and dread; for them the holidays are merely to be endured, gotten over with as quickly and uneventfully as possible.

This is particularly so for those who have lost a loved one over the preceding year. Now the Christmas season is a painful reminder of past celebrations that will never be again, of traditions forever altered. There is little if any comfort and joy; instead, there is sorrow, perhaps even despair. This puts those in mourning completely out of step with the rest of society, further intensifying their feelings of isolation and loneliness.

While they may have navigated through other special occasions this year, Christmas epitomizes family togetherness and closeness and is steeped in ritual and tradition. It is a time of reaching out to others in a spirit of caring and generosity.

But how can one embrace this spirit when he or she feels empty inside?

If you are among those who are grieving the recent loss of a loved one, you may be wondering: Will Christmas time always be this difficult? Will I ever again be able to enjoy the many special sights and sounds of the season?

Those who have journeyed through the dark tunnel of grief and come out the other side — as people eventually do in their own way and time — assure us that gradually the pain does diminish.

How to deal with Christmas depression

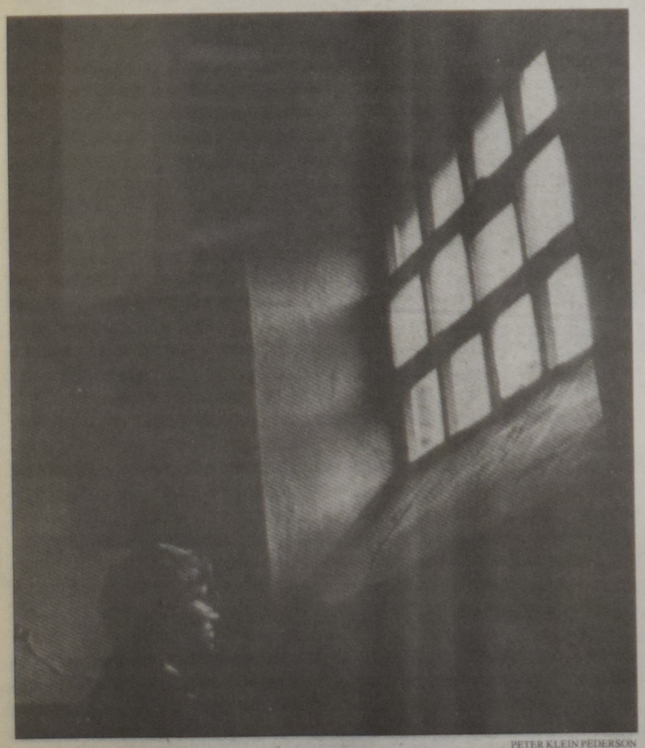
But how to cope in the meantime, particularly in the coming weeks of Christmas-related celebrations?

- Bereavement counselors and those who have been through the grieving process offer the following insights and advice:
- Accept that this year will be different. Don't try to act as if nothing has changed. Face the heartache and tears, knowing they are a necessary part of healing. Cherish memories of Christmases past and share them with others.
- Pray for guidance, strength and comfort. If your faith is shaken or you otherwise feel particularly troubled, make an appointment to talk with your pastor.
- Evaluate the meaning of the holidays in your life. Decide what is really important to you, focus on it and forget the rest, at least for this year. Some people find it comforting to continue with familiar traditions, while others prefer to start new ones. Do what feels right for you.
- Let loved ones know your needs and limitations.
- Plan ahead to help reduce anxiety and stay focused.
- Whatever holiday-related tasks you decide to take on, ask for help and delegate responsibilities. Make lists to keep organized, since grief saps energy and affects concentration.
- If you accept an invitation, do so on condition that you may back out at the last minute if you don't feel up to the occasion. Take things one day — and one event — at a time.
- Guard your health. Poor physical condition will only make you feel worse.
- Express your feelings. Find someone who will listen and empathize, or write down your thoughts and feelings in a journal.
- Choose a way to memorialize your loved one that would be meaningful to him or her — for example, make a donation to a charity they supported or buy a special angel ornament.
- Consider doing something nice for someone, whether it be a friend, acquaintance or stranger. Some people find it helps take their mind off their own situation for a while.
- Take responsibility for your well-being by doing something nice for yourself.
- Try to look for moments of joy, and relish them. Don't allow bitterness or guilt to consume you and rob you of the ability to feel any pleasure.

If you take time now to anticipate events and your reaction to them, and plan some coping strategies, you will make it through the holidays — perhaps even better than you expected. Just remember that there is no right or wrong way to do things this year.

Be patient with yourself. During this season of hope, trust that warmth and light will gradually return to your days.

Lisa M. Petsche writes from personal and professional experience. She is a social worker and freelance writer.



PETER KLEIN PEDERSON

Those who have journeyed through the dark tunnel of grief and come out the other side — as people eventually do in their own way and time — assure us that gradually the pain does diminish.

The best things in life are free

Intangible Things

Heidi VanDerSlikke

As I write this column I'm sitting here wearing a mustard gold cardigan that's so old the color is actually back in style. No, chicken farming hasn't gone the way of the airline industry. This sweater was my father's favorite. I found it way at the back of a shelf in my mother's closet last week when I was helping her move out. The second I laid eyes on it, a flood of memories tumbled down from that remote corner in my mother's bedroom.

Every day when my dad came home from work, he would hang up his coat in the hall closet and slip into this sweater for the evening, kind of like Mr. Rogers. I remember how pleased he was when he first brought it home. My mother always chose "neutral colors": brown or beige for my father's clothing. But my dad had his own unique taste, and when he first pulled on this golden beauty, he thought he was pretty stylish.

He wore it almost every winter evening. I remember him snuggled up in it while sitting by the fireplace, reading a book. He wore it when he sat playing cards with my mother at the dining room table, and when he fell asleep on the couch watching *Hawaii 5-0*. He even pulled it on over his pyjamas during the last days of his life.

Memories of Pa at Christmas time

But the most vivid memories I have of Pa in this sweater are from Christmases long gone by. I can picture him wearing it as he put up the tree. Always the perfectionist, he would cut out branches from certain spots, drill holes in empty places and insert greenery where nature hadn't provided any. He went to great lengths for the love of symmetry.

One year my brother and I picked out the tree. We came home with a rather lopsided specimen, a straggly six feet tall. My father began his cosmetic improvements. For at least an hour we heard the sound of clipping, sawing and drilling from the garage. Then we heard the car pull out. Closer inspection revealed a whole pile of evergreen boughs suitable for decorating the beam in the recreation room, and a nearly perfect two-foot spruce tree which my sister-in-law later took home to her apartment. When my father returned, another tree stuck out of the trunk of the car. Both my brother and I had the good sense not to make any comments until the new tree was up and decorated.

My father wore this sweater on what would be his last Christmas Eve, some twenty five years ago. He still looked healthy that evening, having learned of his illness just a few short weeks before. Handsome as ever in his golden cardigan, his eyes reflected the dancing light from the fireplace. His music wafted softly from the stereo. A lovely, carefully balanced tree stood straight and tall in the corner. We all knew it would be our last Christmas together, but Pa was determined to enjoy whatever time he had left, especially Christmas Eve.

Flash fire tradition

He even managed to take my mother's mind off of her sadness for a while by stuffing so much gift wrap into the fireplace that she thought she should call the fire department. As the tongues of fire came shooting out, licking perilously at the fieldstone mantel she told him off, and he laughed. It was an annual tradition, this flash fire of his, and he wasn't about to let it die before he did. Just for a few minutes the awful spectre of the future disappeared into the good-natured bickering of man and wife.

It's the darkness of the night sky that enhances the radiance of the stars isn't it? And in a way it was the backdrop of my father's illness which made that particular Christmas Eve singularly beautiful. I wish I could write that my dad knew the significant joy of the Christ child's birth, but that is not the case. Nevertheless, my dad was one of God's good gifts to me. As I sit here in this thirty-year-old sweater, I have fond memories of Christmases past, and a profound thankfulness for Christmases yet to come. What a special blessing to celebrate the greatest gift of all.

Heidi VanDerSlikke lives in Harriston, Ont.

Christmas

The Angel Chorus

Luke 2:8-20
Harry der Nederlanden

When we think of witnesses to the fact, to the truth of the birth of Jesus as God-in-the-flesh, the first thing that comes to mind (to my mind, at least) is the great throng of angels in the sky over Bethlehem bugling and caroling, "*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*"

Nothing, absolutely nothing, could be more convincing than to have the gospel told to you by bright, flaming heavenly messengers speaking in voices that reverberate with the glory of God himself. Once these blazing, miraculous beings have told you that this particular baby born in Bethlehem is the Savior, Christ the Lord, the long-awaited Messiah, can there be even a smidgen or a smudge of doubt left in your mind?

There is hardly any need of faith when you're smacked, overwhelmed, infused with the truth by entire legions of angels dressed in robes flickering like northern lights but far brighter. Truth becomes here not an end product of experience, of investigation or of inference and deduction; it is a hurricane of vision that sweeps the human spirit into its wake.

'But...it is not your spirit that is swept away in that scene, is it?' a voice whispers in your ear. Remember that Luke, the writer, wasn't even there himself to see and hear the heavenly choirs. His account is all hearsay. He may not even have interviewed the shepherds themselves. Moreover, none of the other gospels describe this marvelous scene. If it had actually happened like this, how could any story-teller telling the life of Jesus even think of leaving it out?

So the witness, the eruption of heaven itself into our history to authenticate this otherwise almost tip-toeing, back-door entry of God into our world, into our humanity begins to recede, lose its power and immediacy.

The baby that the shepherds saw lying there in the manger at Bethlehem was just a plain, ordinary baby like you were when you were born. Jesus didn't come with a halo attached, but with an umbilical cord that attached him to his mother Mary. He was caked with blood and had to be bathed and fed and wrapped up against the cold.

He was tiny, weak and helpless, like any human baby. There was nothing god-like about him to distinguish him. He was not particularly pretty, he was not born wise,

THE DORMITION, 13TH CENTURY. TRETYAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW

he did not begin composing symphonies when he was four years old.

And yet...what a birth announcement: emblazoned in the sky by thousands of angels singing more beautifully than all the best cathedral choirs combined. Surely news of such a happening would quickly spread from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, and from there all across Israel. It was, after all, a time when people were on the move by imperial decree. And Bethlehem couldn't be more than a couple hours walk from Jerusalem.

But we read nothing of crowds flocking to Bethlehem or to Nazareth to gaze on the boy wonder the way they did to see the Dionne quintuplets in Ontario.

Bible scholars tell us that in those days shepherds were not highly regarded. They seemed to have a reputation for dishonesty like the gypsies in Europe. Maybe being alone with sheep for days and weeks on end turned them into tellers of tall tales like the mountain men of the Wild West. And maybe when they did finally get to town, they were a little wild and woolly like cowboys after a long trail drive. Whatever the reason, the authorities in Israel didn't trust shepherds; they weren't even allowed to testify in court.

If that was so, why should we sober westerners trust them now – at a step removed – and over 2,000 years later?

Even more puzzling: why on earth waste an angel chorus on witnesses no one trusts? Is this any way to confirm and buttress the truth – the central fact on which all history pivots and all human well-being depends?

On the other hand, if the gospels were written by followers of Jesus who wanted to believe he was super special and wanted others to believe as well, would they cook up a story in which heavenly messengers are sent by God to bring the most important news Israel and mankind have ever heard to a bunch of lousy, untrustworthy witnesses in the hills several miles from the capital city?

Not likely.

The entire story goes contrary to all expectations and contrary to all common sense. But, of course, how else do you introduce a truth that is folly to the wise? How do you represent something that is so new that no one is looking for it and therefore no one recognizes it?

Why did so few people recognize the genius of Rembrandt or Van Gogh in their time? On a much, much lesser level, they too had something new to say, so new that people didn't recognize the truth of it. John says of Jesus that although the world was made through him, and by implication mirrors him, yet it did not recognize him.

Suppose, however, that he had been born into a royal household in the nation's capital and been raised a prince in a palace.... Isn't that exactly what he would have become – a merely earthly prince? Then he would have been recognized and received with fanfare and parades and celebrations of his birth. And he would have sat on a throne for a while, ruled more or less justly and governed more or less wisely. Yet, history would have gone on as before.

What importance would the history of Israel and its kings have had for us today had the Messiah been born according to Jewish expectations? This is not to denigrate the Jews, for they represent the highest moral and political aspirations of humanity – shorn of God-with-us.

No, as we have all felt in our Adamic flesh and bones, the scene described by Luke gets it just right. It is a simple, eloquent witness to this amazing, wholly unexpected event by which God enters history and turns it around so it is no longer a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, but the story of how light and truth, life and peace have overcome folly and falsehood.

It brings together high, heavenly messengers with lowly, earthy witnesses, who had little or no expectations from the high and mighty of this world. He came not to realize the expectations of the rich and cultured but to transform our expectations and get us to look elsewhere. He came to renew our sight, to open our eyes to the fact that we cannot find the truth if we look in the wrong place – in the seats of power.

Mary's Song

Luke 1:39-56
Harry der Nederlanden

THE ANNUNCIATION. JAN VAN EYCK, 1441

The angels sang God's own witness that the babe of Bethlehem is the Messiah, the Son of David and Son of God with heavenly artistry. But both before and after this chorus of witnesses, Luke gives us other, earthly witnesses – also in song. They, too, are powerful, convicting testimonies to the truth, to the fact and the meaning of Jesus' birth. None are weakened in the slightest because they are the expression of the heart and soul as well as the creativity and artistry of the witness.

For some two thousand years now, every year Christians have been echoing Mary's Song at Christmas: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...."

At Christmas we take into our mouths the words Mary uses to respond to the news of the angel and the greeting of Elizabeth. This is an extraordinary and bold thing to do – put ourselves in the place of the mother of Jesus. Isn't it presumptuous to put ourselves on one level with the virgin to whom God sent an angel to tell her she had been favored, chosen to carry the Son of the Most High?

Yet, that is precisely what the church of Christ, which has been given this gospel, is invited to do. As his church we are authorized to take into our own mouths the words of Mary. We sing, joining our voices with hers, about the great things the Lord has done "for me", scattering the proud, bringing down rulers, but lifting up the humble and filling the hungry with good things.

It is a song of praise that brackets the things "God my Savior" has done and is doing in Mary between "being mindful" (first line) and "remembering" (last line). In other words, this is the way God remembers: by entering into our flesh and blood so that we, too, may remember — a remembering that we do most dramatically and intensely when we eat of his flesh and drink of his blood.

This is an unusual Christmas carol, isn't it? The ones we write strive to create a mood of comfort and optimism, radiating warm, positive feelings. They become background muzak to the gathering of friends and family, to presents and good cheer, to eggnog, ham and twinkling lights. They reinforce the dream that human beings really could be good to one another if only they could remember "The Spirit of Christmas" all year long.

However, Mary doesn't sing of good King Wenceslas who shares his bounty with a poor woodsman. She sings, instead, of bringing down rulers. This isn't sentimental fluff, snow falling softly on cedars erasing our worldly cares. Even at this most tender moment when the baby leaps for joy in the womb of the Madonna, the gospel doesn't indulge us, doesn't engage in wish-fulfillment, but tells the truth about the world we have made. And part of witnessing to the truth is dispelling untruth, falsehood, injustice and oppression.

When we allow Mary's voice to become ours, we are enlisted in this spiritual resistance against the domination of the proud and the mighty, a spiritual resistance that, God willing, flows into our lifestyle, our consumption, our career choices, our politics, and our care for this creation and our fellow creatures.

Singing can be a dangerous activity.

Christmas

Zechariah's song

Luke 1:67-80
Harry der Nederlanden

Before Zechariah launches into his song, we recall, he had lost his voice. For the most part, the Christmas gospel occurs behind the backs of Israel's leaders, in the back alleys, so to speak. But Zechariah is an exception. He is part of the elite, a priest selected for an important ceremony he performs on behalf of all the people.

As a priest, he embodies Israel's traditional hopes and expectations. This is his job – remembering the words of the covenant and reminding the people through the rituals of the temple.

When the angel appears to tell him his barren, aging wife will, like Sarah, still bear a son, his reaction is a stark contrast to that of the simple, uneducated girl of Nazareth. Like us moderns, he wants evidence, proof, some kind of further confirmation – as if being visited by an angel sent from God were not enough of a sign.

It is those who are most educated, most serious, weighted with responsibility and authority, who have the most well-developed expectations. They are, after all, the guardians of goodness, beauty and truth; they are expected to uphold the standards and values for all the rest of us, who would no doubt otherwise sink into superstition and barbarity.

DETAIL OF PAINTING BY GERARD VAN HONTHORST, NATIONAL ART GALLERY, LONDON/SUPERSTOCK

Quite a few theologians (and editors) fall into this class. Applying modern historical and scientific standards, they suspect that stories of angel visitations, priests being struck dumb and virgin births are the stuff of folk myth and legend – probably the product of credulous simple folk who have no rigorous sense of truth and see as fact what they want to believe. To the skeptical mind of natural man, then, even miraculous signs cannot validate the truth; on the contrary, because they are miraculous, they cannot meet the criteria of truth. They are not universal; they are unique, exceptional. Our modernist receivers do not pick up supernatural signals; they are attuned only to secular frequencies.

If we are honest, we will have to confess that all too often our minds are likewise attuned. But if we make this confession, and turn to this Christmas gospel, we can make Zechariah's song our own and sing: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people...."

The priest who was deprived of speech by his own wisdom is now given heavenly eloquence and enabled to witness to the truth. In the final analysis, it is only heaven itself that can attest to this earth-shaking, world-taking, creation-remaking truth.

I think that's what Cornelius van Til, the father of presuppositionalist apologetics, means: that only in his light can we see the light that lightens humanity. If we sift biblical revelation through truth-screens of our own making, we will miss the miraculous truth of Christmas – the truth that gives us a voice. We will be left only with the vanity of vanities, an endless cycle of dead facts – just another kid born to a poor couple in an insignificant, dusty corner of the world destined to be reduced to ashes by the mighty Roman Empire.

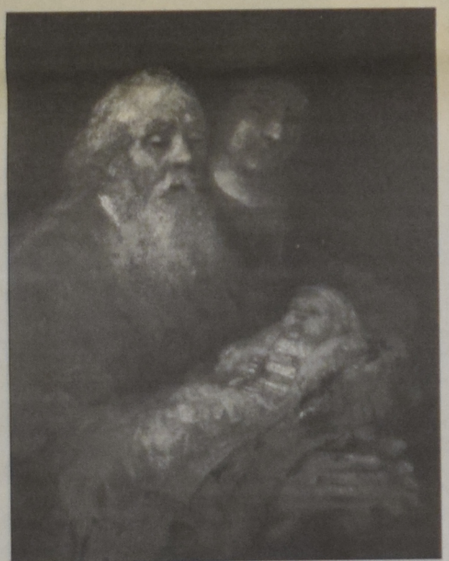
No, it isn't because of his priestly education that Zechariah is enabled to sing, but because God by his Spirit gives him back his voice so he can testify in song "of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

And here we, too, are given a truth not just to contemplate but one that gives us a voice, a joyful, melodious one, one that puts rhythm and grace into our feet.

Song of Simeon

Luke 2:21-35
Harry der Nederlanden

This scene is a clincher for those who argue that the gospels are largely later additions by a church that is seeking to buttress and inflate its own beliefs. To them the prophecy uttered by Simeon is obviously a later addition put here by those who already knew the whole story of Jesus' life.



SIMEON IN THE TEMPLE (ABOUT 1699) BY REMBRANDT. NATIONAL MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN

But why bring in as a witness old Simeon, a man of no stature or significance? All that seems to distinguish him is his old age and his piety.

He may simply have been an ordinary man, but I picture him as someone who has grown a bit strange by reason of old age. Apparently he has become convinced that he won't die until he has seen the Messiah. If he confided this belief to others, undoubtedly people had begun to point him out as someone made a bit dotty by his piety, one of those odd ducks who goes around talking to himself. We'd put him in an old age home where saner minds could keep an eye on him. Otherwise, he might end up on the streets like the bag ladies and those 'wierdos' who live in cardboard boxes.

When Jesus is brought into the temple to be consecrated, he is not greeted and blessed by the priests but by this insignificant, strange old man. Again, truth is recognized not on the basis of all those good things we count on to uphold wholesome values, civility, morality and public order but simply by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, who blows where he will.

This is not to say that Simeon is an ignorant old man who had a purely idiosyncratic, private religion. He knows the prophets; he knows the covenant promises regarding the Messiah. His strangeness is not like that of the sages from the far east: they learned of the one born to be king of the Jews wholly outside of the traditions of Israel – through astrology. Simeon knows the Jewish traditions from the inside. In fact, he knows them better than the leaders appointed to preserve them, for he knows them as a living hope.

His hope is the ancient, long nurtured hope at the very root of Israel as a nation and which is the deep meaning of all its institutions. Apparently this sort of knowledge had been pushed to the margins, maintained mostly by oddballs like Simeon. The leaders – the Pharisees and the Saducees – had regularized and sanitized this tradition, turning this primitive, uncouth hope into a healthy, do-it-yourself discipline for attaining a healthy, respectable righteousness. This sold better to city people, especially to the go-getters and the upwardly mobile who wanted a decent life – prosperity and peace for their children. What could be wrong with that?

Nothing, except that the pursuit of the good life can blind us to the meaning of life itself. We may end up with nothing but empty forms, petrified institutions, caught up in futile pursuits. It is the marginal, near blind Simeon (according to some stories) who sees the meaning of all those traditions, institutions, rituals and offices embodied in the temple fulfilled before his eyes.

Once again the Spirit gives us a testimony in song, a testimony that draws on the memory of traditions of Israel — not as cold fact but as a living hope planted in the heart.

That the hope to which Simeon gives utterance in his song is not merely a piece of wish-fulfillment is proven by the fact that he speaks of dark things as well, of a sword that will pierce Mary's soul. That's how truth is represented in Scripture – as something that cuts apart soul and spirit, joints and marrow – not as something that can be reported objectively and dispassionately. It brings a crisis and demands something of us.

The truth proclaimed at Christmas cuts, but it cuts the darkness like light. It does not leave the world gray, an endless cycle of meaningless facts that leave us weary, as Ecclesiastes puts it. It cuts the darkness and kindles light; it banishes fear; it brings joy.

"Rejoice!" sing the angels.

"Do not be afraid, Mary," say Gabriel. And Mary sings, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

To Zechariah, the angel says, "Do not be afraid; your wife will bear a son. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth."

And aging Simeon is so delighted that he was allowed to see this day, he will now die gladly and in peace, for he has seen God's promises fulfilled in the child he hold in his arms.

This joy that accompanies the proclamation of the truth of God-with-us is not just a subjective response of the hearers; it is of the essence of that truth itself. We may become so overshadowed by the darkness and the fear of death that we feel only pain and suffering and can sing only lamentations on our own. That does not, however, mean that the darkness has triumphed over joy. We can then ride piggy-back on the voices of Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, the angels and the songs of the church throughout the ages. They are voices – songs – that God himself has given us to celebrate the fact that he has come among us to bear all that pain so that one day our joy will be complete.

Christmas & Artistry

Painters celebrate Christ's birth

In this issue we've been celebrating the fact of Jesus' birth as the truth that calls forth its own unique witnesses. Unlike the truth of our enlightened, scientific worldview, it does not seek to bracket out our commitment and devotion, but it demands of us a total witness, best expressed in our artistry – our music, poetry and painting.

So we reproduce here some of the ways painters in the western tradition have depicted the events of the nativity or Mary and the baby Jesus. The variety of styles and viewpoints is huge; yet, they all witness to the one truth. Similarly, each of us witnesses in very different ways to the truth that is our source of light and life. Sometimes those different visions and ways clash, but that doesn't mean those differences are evil and need to be leveled out. The Spirit of God testifies with our spirit, and does so by liberating us and giving us a voice.

On the basis of this birth, this fact, we are transformed into a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, so that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. What better way to celebrate and praise than by our artistry?

Abraham Bloemaert, ***Adoration of the Magi***

The "kings" of Bruegel's painting are magi here (in Bloemaert's painting), that is sages. The biblical account tells us little about them other than that they were from the east and were led to Bethlehem by a star. This leaves room for quite different ways to imagine them. The soldiers in this picture remain at a discreet distance. They are quite clearly little more than an escort for the wealthy magi. Both here and in Bruegel's painting, they may also serve as a hint of the future, when Roman soldiers will nail Jesus to the cross.

The chalice full of coins would also remind a good Catholic, which is what Bloemaert and his patron were, of the chalice the priest holds up when celebrating mass (the Lord's Supper). And the other gold container holds myrrh, another allusion to the way of the cross that lies ahead for the beautiful baby held by an equally beautiful Mary.

In this portrayal, Mary is neither an other-worldly, idealized being nor the Queen of Heaven we see in many icons, but neither is she a poor Jewish girl. She looks like quite the noble lady. She'd be at home among the high-born ladies of the patron who commissioned this painting.

Joseph, lurking in the background, is another matter. But to emphasize Jesus' supernatural birth, Joseph has to be relegated to the background. Bruegel's Joseph is a very substantial, down-to- earth fellow – the sort of hale and hearty fellow you'd see in a German tavern making jolly with his fellows.

Bloemaert sees the magi as noble men. Each represents the best and brightest from his part of the world. The three magi represent the three races (Shem, Ham and Japheth) and the three continents known at the time. They, too, would be more than welcome at the table of a rich Dutchman.

And the beautiful, blond Jesus, also undoubtedly Dutch, welcomes their gifts and blesses them – a political statement quite different from Bruegel's.

Pieter Bruegel, ***The Adoration of the Kings***

Bruegel's depiction of the wise men or kings coming to worship Jesus is quite unusual. Although the three kings are dressed exotically and resplendently, a close look at the faces of the two shows them to be quite ugly, even sinister. And look at all the soldiers they brought with them: it looks like an entire army surrounds the stable bristling with pikes and spears. The tiny, naked baby at the center looks very weak and helpless in contrast.

At the time this picture was painted, the Lowlands were occupied by Spanish troops. Perhaps that is why Bruegel made the kings ugly – to show the dark, cruel side of human rule. The world the Messiah was born into is one of violence, as the people of 16th century Netherlands knew all too well.

Some painters show the Christ child blessing the wise men or kings. Here the contrast ends up undermining the stature and magnificence of kingship and power, for as Christians we know that the little, naked baby at the centre is the Lord of creation. We also know that Mary's song speaks of bringing down the mighty from their thrones. The rich, colorful clothes are mere trappings that conceal the violence on which power and wealth are so often based.

Are the three kings aware of this as they kneel before the little child? Will it soften their warlike hearts?

Rembrandt van Rijn, ***The Holy Family with Angels***

The Mary of Rembrandt's painting is an ordinary Dutch housewife, and the wicker cradle in which Jesus sleeps is what you'd find in a Dutch household of that time. Is the cradle meant to remind us of Moses' reed basket? I doubt it. There is nothing allegorical in this scene. Take away the chubby angels, and you have a cozy domestic scene celebrating the peace and blessing of a good family life.

This is precisely what Rembrandt's followers did: instead of painting pictures on biblical themes, they made their subject matter the good things of ordinary daily life.

Joseph is also in the background in this picture, but he isn't lurking but working to support his family like a good Calvinist father. He seems to be carving a yoke; perhaps Rembrandt couldn't resist a bit of prophetic symbolism after all.

Mary is reading the family Bible. This is a very traditional touch which we see in many Medieval portrayals of Mary. In them, however, it is an allegorical prop. We really don't believe she's reading it; there it symbolizes the fulfilment of prophecy. The Mary in Rembrandt's picture knows how to read, probably better than her husband, and she'll teach her child to read as well, while Joseph teaches him the skills of woodworking.

Cimabue, ***Madonna in Majesty***

The Mary in this painting is not as iconic, as purely symbolic, as many of the Medieval representations of her. It was painted in Italy in the 13th century, and especially in her body and the folds of her clothes we can see a movement toward painting her as an earthly woman. However, she is still very ethereal and other-worldly here.

In contrast to Rembrandt, the painter shows no interest in putting her into any sort of realistic setting, whether in the painter's time, as Bruegel did, or in Jesus' own time. She is sitting on a throne, not something she ever did in her own life. She has a golden halo around her head like Jesus and all the angels, which are, of course, merely conventional ways to signal holiness. And the background is not an earthly one either; it is gold, the gold of heaven itself.

The picture does not strive for realism in our sense; it strives to depict spiritual truths, heavenly realities. In the painter's vision, Mary is more a transcendent creature by reason of being the mother of Christ than a mere mortal. She rules with Christ in heaven; she is as eternal as Jesus himself, who is less a baby than a symbol of our humanity taken up into heaven.

Unlike the angels in Rembrandt's painting, which protect and comfort Mary in her earthly home, these angels seem to bear Mary's throne up so she can hover in golden space. She is here still more the Queen of Heaven than a mere Jewish, human maid chosen by God.

Hans Holbein, ***Madonna of Mercy and the Family of Jacob Meyer***

Holbein's paintings are familiar even to those who don't know his name, for he did very realistic portraits of Erasmus and Thomas More which appear on the cover of nearly every biography of those famous, learned men of the Renaissance. This no more a nativity scene by our realistic standards than the painting of Mary and baby Jesus by Cimabue; yet, the people in the picture are very realistic. The man is a wealthy Catholic banker who commissioned Holbein to paint this picture as an altarpiece, thereby boldly asserting his Catholic devotion against the Protestant tide moving across Germany.

Although the figures in the picture are very realistic, the way they are depicted is not. Obviously they never sat for their picture with Mary and Jesus present in the flesh. Moreover, both of Meyer's wives are kneeling side by side, but he married the one after the other died.

Like the Mary of Cimabue, this Mary is also an eternal being, a mediatrix, but here she is brought, as it were, into the living room of this devout family by the depth of their piety. Notice that the traditional halo has been replaced by a large seashell ornament that suggests a halo. Mary wears a crown instead, bringing baby Jesus from heaven to bless the devout family.

Notice that the blond, curly-haired baby Jesus looks remarkably like Meyer's own youngest son; this gives his piety a very domestic, sentimental feeling. There's little here of Christ the Lord and no hint of the crucified one as in the paintings by Bruegel and Bloemaert.

By the way, if you look closely at the three kings in Bloemaert's painting, you'll see a fourth figure. This is probably his patron. Painters often put themselves or their patron into "Adoration" scenes alongside the shepherd or the kings to express their own praise. Meyer brings the nativity into his own living room, rumpling his precious carpet.

William Kurulek, ***Do Not Trouble Me Now*** *(below)*

The last painting was done about 25 years ago in Canada. Just as Bruegel and Rembrandt brought the nativity into their own time, so Kurulek brings this astonishing, world-transforming event into our own time and our own country. The setting seems to be the east coast; the couple in the small boat are arriving on Canada's shores the way his parents arrived as Ukranian immigrants.

Although it is realistic, the rays emanating from the heads of the arrivals and also the title make this painting clearly symbolic and didactic. The biblical scene of Mary and Joseph arriving at the inn to be told there is no room for them is reenacted on our own coast. The couple with the newborn child is clearly not getting a hearty Canadian welcome: "Do not trouble me now," the man in the shed says.

I like his choice of the word "trouble." It reminds me of Jesus' saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" and that Mary was greatly troubled by Gabriel's words to her. However, Jesus' coming brings trouble into the lives of the complacent and self-sufficient, and unless we take the trouble to welcome him, we're in deep trouble.

Kurulek's painting teaches us that contemplating a distant nativity profits us nothing. The event of Christmas must enter into our own lives. In this, his painting is very like Holbein's, but without any of the upper-class complacency.

Fiction

The seven story mountain

Walfried E. Goossen

"They all eventually kill themselves on the side of that mountain," exclaimed Ibe, Rishi's mother.

She glanced at her twelve year old son. She knew she shouldn't use that word "kill" in his presence. He suffered daily from the memory of his father's death on Everest just five months earlier. Baai Tensing, her husband, had been a guide to mountain climbers like his father and grandfather before him. But Ibe was bent over by bitterness and anger. She remembered that she might also lose her son.

Many years ago, Norgay, Rishi's grandfather, had stood on top of the world with Sir Edmund Hillary on Chomolungma, known also as Mt. Everest, 29,000 feet high. Baai had reached the summit in a subsequent climb.

However, he had died coming down, his goal only half accomplished. Reaching the top was only a partial success. Reaching the bottom again was the real challenge. That's when Everest is most cunning and ruthless.

Rishi would be the next to face the challenge. His father had begun to teach him mountaineering the year before the accident, but he was not yet ready. His modest height and 150 pounds were well adapted for the difficult maneuvers required on the sheer slopes, but Rishi himself doubted he would ever be ready.

HARRY DER NEDERLANDEN ILLUSTRATIONS

Struggling for relief, his thoughts turned to Salapka and Didi, his sister and her husband, who lived on Mardi-Humaal, the 5,500-foot mountain at whose base the family cottage stood. Why they chose to live there was inexplicable to him. The mountain was fairly small, but the ascent and descent were sheer. The only navigable path was narrow and slippery and in bad weather treacherous.

And why had his father chosen to locate the family at the foot of this mountain? The boy felt a sullen hostility toward the Mardi-Humaal. It towered over him, intimidated him, invited him, challenged him. It haunted him, taunted him, and hunted him. The base was almost as desolate as the top. The valley was largely flat land, with shrubs and furze and wasteland vegetation sparsely scattered on the valley floor.

On cold nights when the icy darkness would try to penetrate the family's two room cabin, Father had often come home with small game, his rifle harness slung over his shoulder. Already warming themselves at the cosy fire in the hearth, the family would welcome him home with warm embraces and greetings.

But Salapka and Didi — why so high?

His mother Ibe explained one day that the flat land there, a few dozen acres of spare vegetation and sandy soil, was free to anyone who claimed it. "I wonder when they will come down again this time," Ibe asked one evening. "If they wait too long, Didi will have to have her baby on top of that mountain."

"Salapka will bring her down in time," Rishi replied, disguising his nervousness. If his sister couldn't come down someone would have to go up. He knew it would not be his mother. Neither spoke.

Ibe stood over a pot and stirred. Rishi leafed through a book, a Bible, left him by his grandmother Seely. Although the family was Buddhist, Seely had become Christian and told Rishi many stories about Jesus. Tonight he missed her and looked for the pictures in the pages of the familiar stories.

The next evening their two-way radio crackled and beeped. Its light blinked urgently.

"Answer it will you Rishi?"said Ibe.

He left his carving and jumped to his feet. "Perhaps it's Salapka to say they are about to come down," he guessed. He listened on the ear phones but couldn't speak. "Aamaa (Mom), you better take this," he stuttered and dropped with a loud thud onto his father's rocking chair.

"Didi? When are you coming," shouted Ibe anxiously. She listened as her daughter explained. "Yes, Didi, of course he will. You need some food and clothing and birthing supplies? Yes, yes, tonight."

Rishi, stared at the floor, then the stone fireplace to avoid his mother's eyes.

"Rishi, you must go — tonight. We have no one else. Your father taught you...." Her excited voice slowed and softened. "Salapka has fallen into a crag on the mountain. He managed to drag himself home, a quarter mile, but his leg is broken. It would be dangerous for them, the baby is due any day, you must...."

Rishi nodded in speechless agreement.

From its base Mardi-Humaal looked as high as Everest. Its top was swallowed by infinite darkness as Rishi set out with Kumuri, his pony. Rishi kissed his mother's wrinkled, leathery cheek. She murmured a prayer and added, "Don't be afraid." She noticed he was wearing grandma's small wooden cross. But Ibe was afraid too.

Rishi paused at the foot of the treacherous path, one hand on the pony's halter. Kumuri shifted nervously from foot to foot. An image of Mary and Joseph and their donkey flitted through Rishi's mind. Seely could only read a bit, but this story was one of seven favorites which she had often told the boy.

The stars above invited boy and pony to join them in the sky. A bright moon lay a spectral bluish sheen on the path. Rishi took heart from the ease with which he and Kumuri climbed the first five hundred feet. The path was wider than he expected. But a stiff wind tugged at his clothes.

He grasped grandma's cross with his hand. He was not a Christian, but he had many questions, especially tonight. He remembered it was Christmas Eve. As he climbed he told Kumuri the seven stories he'd learned from Seely to dispel the loneliness.

Suddenly he stepped into deep blackness and saw nothing of the path at his feet. He was climbing blindly. Kumuri pulled at his harness but Rishi held on. The path became steeper. Rishi almost stumbled but regained balance. "Look Kumuri, above us — a bright star...like the one at Bethlehem."

He thought about Didi. A baby! And she was only a few years older than Mary when the angel visited her and told her, "Fear not." He had never seen a birth and knew little about it. Having a child was apparently a very difficult thing, often with much pain and even risk to both mother and child. The mystery of birth frightened him. So much about life frightened him.

A slight misstep by Kumuri alerted him to the present. "Night sure is thick tonight," he said to the pony. He continued to tell the seven stories. A stiff wind soon became a gale and whistled around the mountain, pushing down on boy and beast as if to prevent them from going farther.

They climbed up and up, paused occasionally to catch their breath, and climbed again. A spidery network of lightening cracked through the ghostly mountain valleys and lit up the Himalayas and the thunder seemed to shake the entire world.

But Rishi could only see a bit of this display. Already the rain was washing down Mardi-Humaal's slopes, and flowed like a river rushing to the bottom. Rishi told Kumuri as much as he could of the stories. They distracted him from the elements and his voice soothed Kumuri.

"Fear not, for I am always with you." The memory of grandma's gentle voice whispered in his ear, under the shrill high pitch of the wind. Rishi paused for a few minutes, remembered Didi, lowered his head and struggled on. Every step was risky. Pinned to the side of the mountain by rain, wind, and fear, Rishi whispered a prayer to Jesus — for the first time in his life. Every few steps he interrupted his story with, "Fear not for I am with you...."

He was completely enveloped now by the violence of the icy storm and the menacing path. His isolation was total. With aching legs he pushed up the pathway and suddenly, just as he finished the seventh story, he was standing in front of Didi and Salapka's cabin, the windows aglow with cheerful relief.

Fiction/Christmas

He hurried to the door, and knocked loudly.

"Rishi, is that you? Come in, come in." It was Didi. He stumbled in and rushed to Didi's bed to give her a great hug.

"It..it..looks like I'll have the baby here, no time to go down now," she admitted reluctantly, and surprised him with a kiss on the cheek and a "Blessed Christmas."

"I'm sorry little brother, but Salapka there," she said, pointing to a bench in a corner of the room where he sat, "broke his leg this morning. He won't be able to go down for a while, never mind take me."

Salapka smiled and nodded. "Yes, and that makes your trip up here all the more vital," he said, and added, "We prayed for you."

Didi clutched her belly and cried, "Salapka!"

He stumbled to her bed as quickly as he could, grasping at furniture and Rishi's shoulder. "You will have to help, and," he added mischievously, "if you pass out, I'll help you."

Rishi stuck out his tongue. Didi giggled, but pain subdued her. "Fear not," she called out to assure Rishi, who glanced at her in surprise.

Salapka swiped his black hair from his dark eyes and laughed. "Don't worry; I'll be the doctor, you be the nurse. Go and bring in the things you brought."

Rishi was entirely confused, but within minutes he was boiling water and rushing to bring Salapka everything he asked for. Then, suddenly he stopped. A new voice! One he had never heard before — the baby!

"It's a boy," shouted Salapka. Didi smiled joyfully. "We'll call him Rishi in honor of his courageous uncle. Rishi smiled shyly, squeezed Didi's hand, choked back a tear. "I would like to sit outside a bit," he whispered.

"And then you can sleep as long as you want," said Didi.

"How beautiful you are tonight Didi," remarked Rishi impulsively. Didi a mother and she only seventeen! He marveled.

Rishi sat on a rock near Kumuri. The moon still hung over earth like a night light engulfed in gloom. He thought about grandma's story about Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph must have looked much like Salapka and Didi. On the distant horizon he saw hints of dawn among the snowy peaks emerging from night. The shadowy mass of Everest was slowly emerging. The tip of it's highest peak was visible, gilded by the climbing sun.

The huge star above him reminded him again of Christmas and of Bethlehem. He wondered if it was true. Perhaps the same angels in heaven who told the shepherds "Fear not" had watched over him tonight. And He whom grandmother called the Heavenly Father. He hoped he had not offended the mountain gods. Rishi had many questions. He would find the answers he promised himself.

As his head cleared and his nerves settled down he realized that Salapka and Didi had a small manger scene sitting by their wood stove. Salapka and Didi were Christians. In the morning they sang and prayed to the Christ-child. It was Christmas day.

At noon Rishi started for home. The whole world was silent as nature worshiped too. He was less afraid of heights now, and death didn't seem as threatening, even on the mountain. Darkness and lightening storms one could survive, and child birth was now a tender miracle. The birth of Christ, even in a manger, seemed quite possible to him.

"I've overcome many fears," he said happily to Kumuri on the way down. But one he had not confronted yet.

When Ibe hugged him almost desperately at the front door, she asked him if he was still afraid of mountain climbing. He smiled and declared proudly, "Not nearly as much."

"So you will become a Sherpa mountain guide like your father and grandfather?"

He hesitated. "No, Aamaa, I will not. I will look for answers."

To his astonishment, Ibe hugged him again and whispered, "Thank you Rishi." She didn't need to know more for now. She felt as if she too had received a son.

The Christmas beggar

... continued from page 7

aluminum roof.

The Beggar Lady was trapped at our home. She had come four hours by canoe to "visit us" (to beg from us) and we could not turn her out in the rain. So there she sat and sat and sat....

We brought out coffee and crackers. The little ones spilled crumbs all over the floor. The littlest one wet her pants (actually she had no pants on as was the custom) all over our sofa and floor. Our home smelled of unwashed bodies, dirty babies, and coffee.

And this was Christmas.

Gently and wisely

Dad was beaming kindness. I knew the Beggar Lady did not rate high on his list of respected and loved people either, and yet he was willing to give her time and minister to her needs. She had to be dealt with gently and wisely, for she had much need in her soul.

I was reminded of Matthew 25:34-40 (NIV): "Then the King will say...'I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me.... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

Because of Dad and his loving heart, we had an opportunity to put our faith to work and do something special on Christmas — in ministering to the Beggar Lady, we were ministering to Jesus.

Soon enough the rain stopped and the troops filed out, on to "hit" the next house.

Even more fun

We got out the broom, swept up crumbs, mopped up the baby's accident, straightened the house, warmed Christmas dinner, and sat down together.

Our meal together was even more fun than we had dreamed. We savored our time together. We had been interrupted, so we appreciated our solitude even more.

When Mom opened her gift and saw her stationary, she smiled. "This will be just right for corresponding with our praying friends back in the States," she said.

Good! I had hoped it would be nice for her.

We had waited longer for our gifts, so the suspense had built up more, making the unwrapping even more fun.

Faith at work brought not only eternal reward, it brought extra Christmas cheer.

All too soon the day was over, but it had been wonderful. We had shared Christmas dinner together, shared our simple homemade gifts, and shared in Dad's faith at work.

Sylvia Grosh lives in Ukarumpa, Papua New Guinea.

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Christmas

Christmas dimmer

Jack Van Meggelen

Becky was 14, four foot three, and on a good day she had the IQ of a world class golf score. She had a sweet potato face and all the signs of a victim of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. She had been with us for a couple of years after several foster home placements and short lived attempts to live at home. Now that she was becoming a young woman, she had ever so slowly learned the basics of Personal Hygiene 101.

Becky was easy to get along with as long as she was not threatened. Even though most jokes were over her head, she had a good sense of humor. Little compliments about her appearance and abilities always pleased her. Becky had learned that boys would be very interested in her if she let them "do things" to her. This fascinated her and gave us plenty of reasons to worry about her safety.

Very vulnerable

She was not the best student in school and very vulnerable to follow the wrong crowd. Her defense mechanisms included a series of very antisocial behaviors and language that the principal, who liked things to be easy for him, did not brook. So she frequently ended up in his office. To him she embodied all that was wrong with his school, and he'd often use her as an example to all the other trouble makers that made his life miserable.

I often got called to the office, too, to be lectured about her behavior and he'd ask me what I was going to do about it.

So it was up to me to teach her how to behave; meanwhile, she was expelled from school for the umpteenth time. All for her own good, you understand.

Through the Children's Welfare Agency who had placed her with us, we learned that she was a latecomer for her parents. They'd had seven children before her — all of whom had been in foster care for various periods of time, and three of whom were serving jail terms. Two others were single moms, and their children were being monitored by the agency as well.

Sober enough to be civil

Becky didn't know much about her family; she had prearranged office visits once a month, and half the time her dad would at least show up sober enough to be civil. But then he would give her a totally inappropriate gift like a pair of bowling shoes four sizes too big or a statue of the virgin Mary. He would tell her that her mom couldn't come at the last moment, "because she was busy." Before leaving, he'd tell her, "Be a good girl for daddy," and give her a fifty dollar bill, saying, "Buy something pretty for yourself."

Craigie Aitchison's "Christmas Painting" (above) reminds us that the simple message of Christmas comes to the simple in a world of darkness. It is about basic things – hope and new life. The Christmas hustle and bustle, lights and glitter, ornament and extravagance can be so overwhelming that only the beasts are left to witness. Aitchison's painting captures the mood of Van Meggelen's Christmas story.

These visits served no one, least of all Becky, and by now she could read well enough to find her parents in the phone book. From time to time she hinted at running away and going home, so her request for a home visit under supervision was finally approved. It was early November and the visit was scheduled for the first week in December. Her worker picked her up, but they returned less than an hour later. There was no one home.

The worker told us she would try to arrange for another visit before Christmas. Becky showed a lot of anger, frustration, and had a short fuse. Once again she was dismissed from school until after the Christmas vacation. "Maybe the absence from school will make you appreciate us a little more!" said the principal.

The second visit never materialized, and Becky's frustration and anger grew, culminating in a crabby negativism to everyone and everything.

A testy time at our house

Christmas was going to be testy at our house. The other foster children resented her constant fights and irritable behavior. The other kids teased her: "PMS can't be that bad!" Or they threatened to fix her once and for all, and Becky was defenseless and threatened by the whole world.

She would not talk about what bothered her and our attempts to help her were met with a solid wall of denial. "It's the lazy worker and the stupid agency that give me the creeps," she whined. "You'd feel the same way if you had a crazy worker who never keeps her promises!"

Meanwhile, Christmas was fast approaching. Several of the other kids made preparations to spend Christmas day at their own homes.

No place to go

Becky had no place to go to even for one day and stayed with us. We had Christmas at our house that year and a lot of family was coming over. Becky knew most of them and especially liked five year old Joshua who was also coming.

Things were not too bad at first. Church had been OK because of the lights and special program, but early in the afternoon she became more and more restless and irritable. Just before dinner she finally blew up in front of every one, and I spent the next half hour trying to calm her down and help her put in words what the real problem was.

She had been told many times that her parents were alcoholics, but she usually denied it. They were just hard working people and didn't have time to visit. This time she agreed that at least there might be some truth to the story.

Dinner could not wait any longer so the family started without us. Becky asked if she could go home for Christmas dinner and if I would drive her to her home for a surprise visit. Surely on Christmas they would have time for her! She had not seen her mom since early summer. Though I warned her that things might not be as she envisioned it, she was adamant that that was what she wanted. When I finally said I would call her home, she cheered up immensely. Her dad answered the phone and said a visit would be fine, "We're not doing anything anyway." It was a bitterly cold, blustery kind of day and we shivered in the car before it warmed up.

Soon we pulled up a little back lane with a few dilapidated post-war houses on it. The last one was her parents' home.

We knocked on the door but there was no answer. I knocked again, a little harder, because I had spoken to her dad less than an hour ago, but still there was no answer. Becky thought we should just go in after all it was her home more or less, so I tried the knob and the door swung open.

After staring at the sun's reflection on the snow for half an hour, the inside seemed pitch dark, but soon we began to see some details. It looked like a disaster area, with discarded clothes everywhere, torn furniture, spills on the floor, and a fat cat licking at a half-eaten, dried-up pizza in a box on the coffee table. Her dad staggered out of the kitchen and made some excuses for not having had a chance to do a little cleaning, seeing that we had only just called.

Her mom was a monstrous woman slouching on the couch in a flimsy nightgown which was ripped in various places, exposing much of her varicosed thighs. One slipper dangled from her foot, the other was nowhere to be seen. Her hair had not been combed in days and her face was swollen and blotched with various colors. Her eyes were concealed behind sunglasses.

She mumbled something but was drowned out by the TV which had a religious program on. After a few bars of the song, "It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer," she sat up a little, and blurted out in a slurred voice, "They can say that again; that s-s-sure is me!"

Then she sank down again, removed her glasses, looked at us with glazed eyes and said, "Hi, Becky, is that you?" She flung her arm out over the side table and knocked a bottle on the floor. No one reacted.

Becky was stunned and only slowly comprehended what was happening. Then she asked me if Joshua would still be "at home."

Silently we drove back in a warm car and joined the rest of the family for pumpkin pie, her favorite desert.

Jack Van Meggelen lives in Toronto.

Editor's postscript:

That was Becky's Christmas. Jack Van Meggelen tells it like it is and leaves us to make our own connections. Most of our "Christmas stories" follow a predictable formula and come to a happy, often miraculous ending. But Jesus took on the flesh of people wandering in darkness, many of whom had stopped looking for a Savior. Most of them will not be visited by angels to give them hope, they will only get a taste of that hope indirectly. Perhaps through you or me.

Christmas

A Pat in an Ark

Frank de Vries

"Sanna Claus," yelled Pat, and pulling his hand from his Mom's he loped with long uneven strides through the mall to where a long-bearded man sat on a bench holding a Christmas paper wrapped parcel. As always Pat moved fast, though with a pronounced limp due to a hemiplegic condition, the result of an early childhood injury. His left arm was folded close to his chest, but he was windmilling mightily with his right arm as he ran. He came to a sudden stop in front of the man. Being legally blind he bent over from the waist to stare him close in the face. Then, quite convinced that it was indeed Santa, he unceremoniously plunked himself down on the man's lap and draped his arm around his neck. The pupils of his eyes dropped, hardly visible as they were covered by his eyelids. And so he sat with a beatific, deeply satisfied smile on his face. Pat's day was made, his life fulfilled, and Sanna had made it happen.

An unexpected,'loving assault

This time of year all this seems like a pretty normal happening, but for a couple of things. First, the man wasn't Santa Claus, but a bearded, older man who was probably waiting for his wife to finish her shopping; he took the unexpected loving assault in good stride. Second, Pat is 31 years old. But the story goes back some 30 years ago.

Celia, my wife, for many years a caregiver for the physically and mentally disabled, had been speaking with a social worker who had asked her to visit a year and a half old little boy in Sunny Hill hospital in Vancouver. Apparently this child had been injured in early life, ended up with severe trauma to his brain, and had been abandoned by his parents. The social worker expressed the hope we would be willing to "take him in." By this time we had adopted two children and weren't really ready for another one. However, we were told the child only needed a home for a while and was not adoptable. Due to his severe injuries as well as the impossibility of locating his parents for adoption assent, he would have to remain in the care of Social Services.

We walked into a large room; there sat a little boy on a small rug, his left arm was folded across his chest, and he sat rocking back and forth, back and forth. Even with insistent prompting he did not react to any of our ministrations. Then I could not help but notice an older piano sitting against one of the walls. I played piano a little, and felt challenged by the non-response of the boy. I picked him up, sat on the piano stool in front of the piano, and put him on my lap. I placed his little hands on mine and began to play a simple melody, his hands glued to mine as I played. He stopped rocking, sat still, his little hands on top of mine sliding left and right on the keyboard. The rest is history.

'L'Arche,' or 'The Ark'

Music became a big thing in Pat's life. To this day Pat loves music, is a great on-the-spot rhythmic hopper, and whenever given a chance fiddles with the knobs on the car stereo. Pat is 31, but still today his mental age is that of a child. We had him in our home for 21 years, after which everyone concerned felt he should have a different placement in a home better equipped to meet his needs. And so for 11 years he has been a resident in a "L'Arche" home in Victoria, here in B.C.

L'Arche had its beginnings in France when in 1964, in the village of Trosly-Breuil, Jean Vanier, son of Georges Vanier, former Governor General of Canada (1959-1967) first took into his home two men with a developmental disability. He called that home "L'Arche," or "The Ark." Since then L'Arche has grown into an international federation, in more than 30 countries, with more than 100 communities where such disadvantaged people can live (3 in Victoria, B.C. alone.) Such communities seek to empower and validate the physically and mentally challenged, to reveal their particular gifts, and to help fill the deepest need of every human being, that is, to love and to be loved.

Communities of faith

These L'Arche homes are communities of faith where special needs residents are called to grow in union with God. The homes usually have four to six residents and are rooted in prayer and trust in God. They seek to be guided by him as well as by their weakest members, through whom God's presence is revealed. Some of these communities are of one faith, others are inter-religious. Those that are Christian are either of one denomination, or inter-denominational. L'Arche communities are places of hope, and wish to provide their members with the means to develop their spiritual life and to deepen their union with and love of God and of other people.

Every six weeks or so Celia and I visit Pat to take him out for coffee or lunch. It is always a fun time, and usually draws tears from our eyes. For when Pat sees us he'll dance around and loudly announces to anyone and everyone that "the Mom" and "the Dad" are here. He shakes the hand of everybody in sight or, if they're in a wheelchair, pats them on the head, wishing all and sundry a good time.

When he arrives at the car, Pat opens the rear door for Celia, who now is relegated to the back seat. Pat sits in the front beside "the Dad" where, immediately upon being seated and belted in, he starts punching stereo buttons and rolling the window up and down. Once in the restaurant he often stands up when the coffee arrives, patting the waitress on the arm while assuring her "good coffee. Thanks."

Bringing Christmas presents

Next weekend we'll visit Pat again, bringing him his Christmas presents: a flashlight with battery included, a new shirt, a mom-knit green froggy, and a stuffed Frosty-in-a-box, who, when squeezed, sings "Frosty the Snowman" twice in a row in the most horribly electronically reproduced voice imaginable.

We just received the annual L'Arche Christmas card in which amongst other things we were requested to bring an ornament for the L'Arche Christmas tree. The ornament is "to have a special meaning or prayer in it." And so Celia and I made one: it is a round, wooden ring about three inches in diameter in which we placed a picture of Pat with underneath words that truly reflect our deepest feelings about the little boy, now a man, we picked up some 30 years ago:

Blessed are the Patricks of this world,
For theirs is the kingdom heaven.
Matt. 5:3

Patrick is a happy, thankful man, blessed with the gentle and loving Spirit of the Lord. We know for sure that Pat will have another wonderful Christmas. We pray that all other Patricks, whether in an Ark or not, may have a special, blessed Christmas this year, too.

Frank DeVries lives in Nanaimo, B.C.

Curbing Christmas commercialism

Lisa M. Petsche

As Christmas fast approaches, retailers are doing their best to convince us that the holidays are all about purchasing stuff: expensive gifts, gorgeous decorations, fancy food — all in large quantities. Not surprisingly, many people — especially parents — cite over-spending as one of the biggest sources of holiday stress.

Instead of taking the time to figure out what our budget will reasonably allow and to consider what we're willing to spend and how, some of us just go out and start buying. We choose gifts — most often paid for with credit cards — based on emotion or impulse (or panic if we're last-minute shoppers), then regret our shortsightedness when the bills eventually arrive. (It takes the average credit card user 4-6 months to pay off holiday purchases.)

What are our priorities?

Before we make any more trips to the mall or do any more online shopping, we'd be wise to review the typical flow of money and material goods in and out of our lives, including at Christmas time. What does the pattern say about our priorities as parents or grandparents, as stewards of the earth's resources, and as Christians? Is it in keeping with our core values and beliefs?

A poll conducted last year by the Center for a New American Dream — a non-profit organization dedicated to raising public awareness of the hidden costs of excessive consumption—found that 84 per cent of respondents wanted a less materialistic holiday. For those who feel that way, the Center has produced a helpful brochure titled "Simplify the Holidays" (available for downloading at www.newdream.org/holiday/homenew.html).

More family-focused, more spiritual celebration

It encourages us to reflect upon the kind of celebration we consider most meaningful: perhaps one that's more family-focused, more spiritual, more environmentally friendly, more charitable or all of the above. And it asks, "What kind of Christmas memories do you want to create for your children and yourself?" If we don't give it some thought now, we're likely to get caught up once again in a frenzy of shopping, wrapping, baking, cooking, cleaning and entertaining, to the point where we're exhausted and disillusioned, unable to experience the joy of the season.

Reducing the number of gifts on our list can be part of the solution to this craziness. One way to do this is to encourage and offer to organize gift pools within our circle of family or friends. Another simplification strategy might involve tactfully asking grandparents or other relatives to modify the number or magnitude of gifts they give our kids.

We might also want to consider more meaningful and in many cases less costly and more environmentally friendly alternatives to the usual store-bought stuff we give. These include: homemade gifts—a handcrafted item or baked goods, for instance; gifts of time, involving a service like babysitting or a talent such as hairstyling or photography; gifts of experience that allow the recipient to try something new, like a sport or a musical instrument, or an offer to teach a skill we possess, such as sewing or woodworking; gifts the whole family can enjoy together—for example, a large jigsaw puzzle or tickets to a cultural event; and charitable donations in the name of loved ones. We can let others know we'd welcome these types of gifts as well.

Recently the Center for a New American Dream sponsored a young people's essay/art contest with the theme, "What I really want that money can't buy." Entrants' number one request was for more of their parents' time and unconditional love. That's serious food for thought, especially during this peak time of hyper-consumerism, when many parents will spend hundreds of dollars per child over a few short weeks, without a second thought.

While we might be giving until it hurts (although we probably won't feel the pain until January or February), perhaps we're overlooking the most valuable kinds of gifts we have to offer our children and others. They never involve any regret, either.

Lisa M. Petsche is a mother of three, social worker and freelance writer.

Thanksgiving perspective

Ty Hofman

Thanksgiving and Christmas are only a month apart in the U.S.A. That makes for fast-paced living, but the two celebrations fit together beautifully.

Thanksgiving is the time to reflect on the bounties we enjoy living on this good earth, where a gracious creator blesses all he has made with the gift of life. It is especially focused on fields and flocks, orchards and gardens.

Carving a Christmas... or is that a Thanksgiving turkey?

Reflecting on blessing and bounties

Christmas is the time to reflect on the bounties of God's gift in the sending of our Savior. Thanksgiving gives us a context in which to reflect on the material favors the Lord has bestowed on the many of us not directly dependent on the land. For some of us, that is the very gift of life itself. I am in that category. The 2001 Thanksgiving season has been very special for me.

In 1991, I lived with the distinct probability that it might be my last year. I might have one more Thanksgiving day, with good memories of other Thanksgivings, with gratitude for having enjoyed so many years of church and family celebrations, but with no prospects for another such day. Then the gift of life was marvelously bestowed on me on October 1, 1991 when I underwent major surgery after intensive medical treatment.

With a few deep breaths I sank quickly into unconsciousness. In what seemed no more than a couple of minutes I heard the good news: "They got it! All of it!" With that everything changed. It was hard to believe at first. Could it really be true? It was, and it is. Praise the Lord who heard our prayers!

So that was a most beautiful Thanksgiving for me and for my wife, Cobi, and our family. The leaves were never so red as when we drove back from Ann Arbor, Mich., six days later. What a joy to have the prospects of good days and possibly years of living. What a privilege to see the grandchildren again and be aware that I might be able to watch them grow up. What an experience to meet fellow members of the church in worship and praise and thanksgiving, and to share in the joy of a multitude of friends, family members and fellow believers, near and far.

It was a time to remember how good our Father had been, as creator and provider and the one who had answered our prayers, uttered in the name of a gracious Savior. It was out of his hand that we received a marvelously gifted and devoted medical establishment, able to perform "miracles" of deliverance, with genuine love and concern.

Remembering support of Christian community

It was also a time to remember with gratitude all the wonderful support of a Christian community. That support came to Cobi and me in ways almost too numerous to begin to set forth here — in a card or letter, in a call by phone, in the drop-in visit, in the pastoral call, in the invitation to lunch, in the outstretched hand and the "How are you doing?" after the church service, in the simple "What can we do to help?" and then the doing of it, and in the warm embrace when words were few.

It came through the neighbor who mowed our lawn every week all summer, and all those who drove me to Ann Arbor so Cobi might get a break. It came through loyal friends in Ann Arbor who opened their homes to us so generously. And it all came with the assurance "We are praying for you." What a year it was!

It was a time to dedicate ourselves to total gratitude, in worship, in all our relationships and in our service to Christ's kingdom. I did so with a new perspective and, really, a new life.

I actually wrote much of this 10 years ago. I'm only bringing it up to date now. That means I can reflect on a host of crises further along the way, including a second cancer, multiple hospitalizations, seven additional surgeries and thousands of dollars of antibiotics. And finally some stability, with no pain but enough misery to keep me humble, and a handicap card to help me get to where I'm going. My preaching days are over, and while I sing beautifully, it's only in my dreams. I have plenty of opportunity to reflect on the good gift of life. I have experienced a new appreciation for writing.

In this Thanksgiving season 2001, I reflect on nearly four score years — minus one — which the Bible calls a bonus time, 'by reason of strength.' The last ten years have been a real bonus for me. The 50th anniversary of my ordination to the ministry of the gospel, which my Calvin Seminary Class of 1951 and our spouses celebrated with a dinner on October 10, sort of capped off a life. Of the 16 members of our class, three have gone 'to be with the Lord.' The rest of us were present, to think upon and rejoice in the years of service we were privileged to render.

As I look back in gratitude, I recall Cobi and my four years in Bozeman, Montana; our six years in First Calgary, Alberta; our six years in First Los Angeles Church in California; our four years in Allen Ave., Muskegon; our nine years in Neland Ave. Church in Grand Rapids and six years in Faith Church in Tinley Park, Illinois.

In those 36 years I served in a wide variety of churches and places. I count myself singularly blessed that I was able to serve in both Canada and the U.S.A. My Canadian pastorate in First Calgary, in the time of immigration and church planting, was likely the greatest learning experience of my ministry. Serving three 'old' churches in neighborhoods changing from mostly white residents to mostly black, came a close second. In those three churches, the ministry of the CRC still continues with great blessing. And I led three young churches through to successful building programs.

But the essence of the gospel ministry comes to even clearer expression in the thousands of sermons I preached, in the hundreds of baptisms, once 50 in a single year; in countless pastoral calls to the sick and the weak and struggling and the newcomers to the faith or to the country; the ministry to saints and sinners in the time of personal and family crisis.

I look back and count it a totally undeserved privilege to have served in the ministry and in the CRC. And imagine, I've enjoyed another year of life in which to reflect on these good things. And another year of life in freedom, with an abundance of earthly goods and of opportunity to seek the kingdom of God. All this in the context of friends and family, all totally dear to me.

I'm extremely happy with the possibility of living another year! Thank you, Lord!

Tymen Hofman is a retired minister of the Christian Reformed Church who lives in Grand Rapids, Mich. with his wife, Cobi.

An attitude of gratitude leads to clarity and peace

Lisa M. Petsche

As we face the reality of war and the ever-present threat of further acts of terrorism, we are burdened by anxiety and perhaps fear, seeking ways to feel empowered. The jarring reminder about life's fragility has been a wake-up call for many, prompting re-examination of values and priorities.

The truth that today is all we really have recently hit home to me in an even more personal way. First, a long-time friend suffered a massive heart attack while jogging and couldn't be revived. Within days of the news, a relative experienced a health crisis.

Easy to overlook blessings

Just prior to these events, I had begun writing about how, bogged down by life's details and time-impoverished as we are, we tend to overlook blessings in our daily lives, especially the many small ones — a good book, a soothing piece of music, the smell of dinner cooking, a stranger's kindness, watching the sunset. Consequently, gratitude and appreciation are often lacking. Wouldn't it be wonderful, I speculated, if instead every day were a kind of mini-Thanksgiving? I planned to offer ideas for developing such an attitude.

When I resumed writing after several days of numbness, though, I faced a problem: I wasn't in the mood for gratitude. My dilemma raised a compelling question: Can one practice thankfulness in the midst of disillusionment or grief, and if so, how?

I turned to one of the books on my nightstand, *Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy* by Sarah Ban Breathnach. She contends that not only is it possible to practice thankfulness during times of trouble, it's necessary because "gratitude holds us together even as we're falling apart. Small acts of kindness heal even the deepest wounds; savoring fleeting moments of comfort restores serenity."

What if, at the height of our despair, though, we're unable to identify, let alone savor, a single blessing? "Remember times when you've felt the flow of grace in your life. Allow the gratitude from those times to wash over you. Trust that God wants only good for you," advises Christine A. Adams in *Gratitude Therapy*. Whereas fear focuses on limits, gratitude sees possibilities, she says.

Celebration of quiet joys

An attitude of gratitude doesn't imply being in a constant state of exuberance, however. That's unrealistic. Ban Breathnach describes it, rather, as a celebration of "quiet joys, simple pleasures and everyday epiphanies." It involves focusing on what's already in our lives instead of what's missing. She regards abundance and lack as parallel realities, and says we make the choice as to which one we live in — an empowering concept.

Breathnach encourages keeping a gratitude journal, each day listing five gifts for which we are thankful. (Her book includes 150 "often-overlooked blessings" as a starting point.) If you do this for several months, she says, you'll increase the serenity and joy in your life.

We can learn a lot about life's simple pleasures from young children, by observing the seemingly trivial things in which they delight: holding a ladybug, studying a snowflake, collecting sticks and stones, chasing butterflies, skipping down the street. They allow us the opportunity to view the world through fresh eyes, rediscovering life's wonders — especially nature.

I'm pleased to say I've begun a conscious effort to focus on the abundance in my life, partly through daily journaling. Each morning, too, I give my kids three reasons why it's going to be a great day. (I do the same for myself before getting out of bed.) At night, I help them review their day, identifying blessings for which they are grateful. I want them to recognize that prayers of praise and thanksgiving are as important as prayers of petition.

As for nurturing relationships, here's some advice my friend would have given: Be generous with compliments and cautious with criticism. Listen wholeheartedly. Give bear hugs, blow kisses, and hold hands more often. Make the time. You won't regret it.

Lisa M. Petsche is a mother of three, social worker and freelance writer.

Nose for News

Bert Hielema

HONESTLY, I DO TRY each time to present a bit of cheerful news. I admit, the last column wasn't very uplifting, as it focused on a new and potentially devastating decade ahead. When I take in the news both on the printed page and what glitters before my eyes on the computer screen, I frantically search for positive stuff. I know I won't find it on the tube, which only aims at sensationalism and entertainment, whether that is gory bodies or plumes of smoke from detonating bombs which could come from anywhere, as fakery is the hallmark of televised news.

They tell me that there is a war going on. Well, many of our readers are old hands at that: I had five years of it as a teenager plus army service after the war. As a soldier and instructor I was taught to shoot and kill and use the bayonet. Later I drilled recruits to yell and twist the bayonet in a straw figure and jerk it out again, as if that was a normal thing to do.

However, when it came to the real thing, I failed the test. I went hunting once. A friend had given me a shot gun and when I had a rabbit in my sights, I just couldn't pull the trigger. That was the end of my killing urge.

NOW WHEN I SEE BOMBS drop from these giant planes, some 10-15 km up in the sky, I know that I could never be a pilot or bomber navigator and cause the death and destruction of precious lives. Of course, the Taliban gang must be hunted down, and is, apparently with great success. Perhaps the Afghanistan people are so used to war and so immune to seeing people killed and maimed that they have lost the capacity for revenge. It also seems to me that, in a twinkle of an eye, former allies become enemies and the other way around.

I have always been amazed how a cultivated nation like Germany became a killer nation, thanks to Adolf Hitler. If it could happen there, how much more, it seems to me, in the Arab World, where this man, this tall, photogenic Bin Laden figure, graceful in his evil ways, can do much more in a world of simple choices, where religion is straightforward and dogmatic, where black is black and white is white, where men are all and women nothing, where living is simple and the physical needs few, and where battle death promises paradise.

Can we win such a war? And I don't mean the ground war in Afghanistan. That is just a side-show. The real war is terror and terror is theatre. The Twin Tower spectacle will never be surpassed. It was made for television. I cannot imagine an encore that will best this for drama, for universal coverage, for instilling a sense of foreboding. It need never be followed by any other act of mass terror. Only the hint of one is sufficient.

BETTER GET USED TO IT: we live in a new world. Not a better one. The first casualty of war is the truth, a close second the environment. Kyoto is being killed in the womb. Before 9/11, money was tight. The Canadian military could hardly function through lack of funds. Now suddenly there is all sorts of money — for security, for an expanded military, for possible new threats, such as smallpox and anthrax anti-measures — which means less money for healthcare, for public transportation, for 'welfare', for unemployed, and for environmental clean-up. Already the Province of Ontario wants to cut five per cent of its budget, or $5 billion, but not from the healthcare or education, which is half of the total. This means that the rest will be reduced by 10 per cent. Guess where it will come from: environment and welfare, but not from the extra pay the Ontario Provincial Parliament Members voted themselves.

MANY OF US HAVE seen it with our own eyes: wars cause not only human deaths and wounded, also animals are killed, habitats are destroyed, trees burn, precious pieces of art are obliterated and the list goes on. Just imagine the new pollutants released in the atmosphere and this at a critical threshold in history when we are trying to combat global warming and ozone depletion. That war is now being lost, imperiling every creature on earth.

BUT POLITICIANS LOVE war. They glorify in it. Global conflict gives them the chance to look imperial as they utter their well-rehearsed untruths. They promise us victory without sacrifice — 'go shopping' is their remedy. They promise us battles always successful, missions never impossible. America abandoned Afghanistan once and left a population ripe for anarchy. With shrinking tax dollars, increased expenses, perhaps a depression looming, will we be ready to sacrifice our 'too much' so that others may have enough?

Yet, this war is needed. But so are housing for the world's poor, decent food and medical aid. Everywhere. If it's not forthcoming, when the war is officially over, it won't be over. Those who now shout Hosannas to Osama, will multiply and infiltrate and cause trouble and make our world just like the world we have created for them: desolate and barren, full of anarchy and evil.

Let's hope someday soon I can report "good news for the poor."

THERE IS SOMETHING about secret operations that arouses my imagination, or perhaps awakes the eternal child in me. I may not be a Curious George, but I certainly am a probing Bert, with an abiding interest in most anything. As a teenager in German-occupied Holland, I was keenly taken in by underground organizations. Each week we had several 'illegal' newspapers secretly delivered to us and the way we stealthily listened to 'Radio Nederland', courtesy of the BBC, added to the mystique. We weren't even supposed to have radios then. It took some fiddling to get clear reception on the shortwave, which was always jammed by the Germans. There were also the sanctioned sources, of course, but they duly reported what the Nazi brainwashing war machine fed them.

Today military propaganda hasn't changed all that much. A few weeks ago a briefing at the Pentagon showed some of the insecurity of the soldiers in charge. It concerned their first commando raid near Kandahar, which was touted as having been successful, with all objectives achieved without loss of life or limb. Well, somehow disgruntled members of the 'secret' Delta Unit , peeved that their expertise had been abused, leaked a different story: the entire mission had been a flop, causing casualties without gaining anything worthwhile.

There was no real justification for this cover-up except Pentagonian pride. The mission was already over. The enemy knew what had happened, but the brass did not want to see their stupidity exposed. But when it came out, this was precisely what happened.

KEEPING MISTAKES from the public is bad. Touting success in war based on fake evidence is worse. But the grossest misuse of secrecy is to obscure the broadest outlines of the strategic objectives from the public, because their presence — or absence — cannot be hidden. It has now become clear that the U.S. went into Afghanistan without a definite objective, except to kill bin Laden. They hoped that somehow the puzzling problem of civic government there would miraculously fall into place after the demise of the Taliban. Well, agreeing who will rule Afghanistan is even more bizarre than trying to determine how the presidential vote went in Florida. And will take even longer, I imagine.

In WWII there was a grand overall post-war plan in which the public participated. Now with the unexpectedly rapid success in Afghanistan, the lack of a 'post-conflict' game-plan is becoming obvious.

Although the Americans have a tendency to underestimate their enemy, this time they may have overestimated its staying power. Who knows, all these women behind their burqas may have exercised more influence over their men than the Taliban realized.

WE NOW HAVE COME TO a crucial point in this conflict. A dangerous juncture. There is a Dutch saying that a trapped animal may make unpredictable moves. This is what bothers me about this cornered beast. In a BBC interview, the Taliban leader, Mohammed Omar, stated that America would be destroyed with God's help. He said that this was not a question of nuclear or biological weapons but divine intervention, much more powerful than bombs. Is this an empty threat, or is there some other terrorist plot in the works? The coming days or weeks will tell.

Back to bin Laden. It is curious that children of affluence often become terrorists. This was the case with the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany, the Red Brigade in Italy and the Students for a Democratic Society — especially its offspring, the Weathermen — in the U.S.A. Osama, too, has that easy, moneyed smile, and all the markings of wealth. He is a blessed child of the global economy, and could have been another Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Today he is what *Harper's Magazine* calls: "our American Lucifer, a fallen archangel of Western prosperity." If I were not a Christian, I might have turned out that way.

Bert Hielema has been sampling the medical system. More about that at a later date.

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Calendar of Events

Items appearing in this column are run free of charge if they advertise an admission-free event, if they accompany an ad for the same event, or at the discretion of CC. In case of free listing, space limitations apply. The charge otherwise is $7.50 per line, or $1.50 per 1/3 line, per insertion.

Dec. 8	Mountainview concert, **Grimsby.** André Knevel, organ, flute, Stephanie Scholman, violin, Hosanna Choir.
Dec. 15	Can. Chr. Education Foundation. Repeat performance **VISION TV** broadcasting. See ad in this issue.
Dec. 15	Christmas Concert choirs and band Ontario Chr. Music Assembly under direction of Leendert Kooij, with André Knevel at the organ, **Cambridge,** Ont. Maranatha CRC 7:30 p.m. Adults $10, Students $6 (children under 12 FREE) Call 519-623-8151
Dec. 16	St. Thomas "Crescendo" Male Choir and Organ concert Knox Presbyterian Church, 55 Hincks St., **St. Thomas**, Ont. 7:30 p.m. Offering Christmas Care and Salvation Army. Info. 519-637-4357
Dec. 18	Christmas Concert Ont. Chr. Music Assembly, director Leendert Kooij, André Knevel, organ, **Bowmanville**, Maranatha CRC 8 p.m. Adults $10, Stu. $6 children under 12 FREE) call 905-623-7196
Dec. 22	Same concert as above, **Willowdale,** Ont. Willowdale United Church 7:30 p.m. Same admission. Call the OCMA at 416-636-9779
2002	
Jan. 19	Concert St. Thomas "Crescendo" Male Choir, Covenant CRC **St. Catharines**, 7:30 p.m. Free will offering. For info. call 519-637-4357
Feb. 8-10	Ottewell CRC, **Edmonton,** Alta. 40th anniversary. Please call 780-461-4586. See ad in this issue.
Feb. 22-24	50th Anniversary Inglewood CRC, **Edmonton,** Alta. Friday Family Night, Saturday evening Banquet, Sunday 10 a.m. Celebration Worship Service, 4 p.m. Organ concert/Hymn Sing. See ad in this issue.
April 21	**Calgary** 1st CRC 50th Anniv. Former members welcome. For info. 403-243-2244 celebr8fifty@aol.com

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Ontario Christian Music Assembly
under the direction of ***Leendert Kooij***
with ***Andre Knevel*** *at the organ*

Admission: *Adults $10, Students $6*
Children under 12 – FREE

December 15	December 18	December 22
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Maranatha CRC	Maranatha CRC	Willowdale United
(519)623-8151	(905) 623-7196	(416) 636-9779
7:30 p.m.	8:00 p.m.	7:30 p.m.

Christmas Praise for the whole family!

Inglewood CRC
(formerly Third CRC)
of Edmonton, Alberta
will be celebrating its
50th anniversary
on February 22-24, 2002 D.V.
Join us for **Friday** family night, a commemorative banquet on **Saturday** evening, a celebration worship service on **Sunday** morning at 10:00 a.m. and followed by an organ concert/hymn sing at 4:00 p.m. All former members and friends are invited to attend.
For banquet reservations and more information please call
Coby Benoit at 708-451-5290
or
e-mail:
cbenoit@powersurfr.com

50th Anniversary
Wellandport "Riverside" CRC
invites all former members to join us in a Sunday of celebration on
January 20th, 2002 D.V.
Special morning service: 10:00 a.m.
Coffee social in the Wellandport School Gym
Candlelight service: 7:00 p.m.
(Note time changes)
Any questions, greetings/ congratulations:
Wenda Gerryts 905-386-6448
5007 Canborough Rd.
Wellandport, ON L0R 2J0
E-mail:
wgerryts@fastmail.ca
Joe Vantuyl 905-386-6817
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News Digest

Priest pays parking tabs

WEERT, the Neth. (Religion Today) — A Dutch priest is paying the parking fines of his congregation, after police ticketed hundreds of churchgoers attending a special anniversary mass, reports Ananova.com.

Wim van der Valk, priest of the St. Martinus Church in Weert, the Netherlands, will pay out of his own pocket more than 200 of the tickets his congregation received. He says the police should be catching criminals, not ticketing churchgoers on a Sunday morning.

"Is this so important for the police to go about writing out parking-tickets as the highest priority?" the priest asked *De Telegraaf* newspaper. "If you call the police at night to tell them about drug addicts or people beating others up, you hardly see anyone. But on Sunday morning they want to put everything in order."

Snow for Puerto Rico

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (Seattle Times) — A truckload of Alaska snow is headed to Puerto Rico so children there can build snowmen. In November, workers loaded more than 29 tonnes of snow from an Anchorage parking lot into a tractor-trailer truck. They locked the doors, cooled the trailer to -13 degrees and began the long drive to Elizabeth, N.J., where the shipment was loaded onto a containership for Puerto Rico.

Once there, the load will be dumped on the floor of a refrigerated warehouse so children can play in the snow, for a price. "It sounded a little nuts to me," said Chris Couch, co-owner of Crouch Plowing & Removal, who got the call to help with the load. Export company Transport Partners of Quispamsis, New Brunswick, organized the snow-lift. Each November, the company ships seven truckloads of snow to Puerto Rico for the annual carnival.

Snow can usually be found on Canada's east coast by November. But as the due date loomed earlier this month, Matt Brown, who is co-ordinating the snow-lift for the company, faced few choices. "Factor in logistics of finding a freezer truck, and Anchorage was the closest place we could find," Brown said.

Extreme ironing

LONDON, England (Ananova) — Britain has won the World Extreme Ironing Championships — from the top of an Alpine mountain. The all-British team of four won the competition by ironing at an altitude of 1,670 metres in the Chamonix Valley in the French Alps.

This spoof sport is growing in popularity and is aimed as a parody of popular 'extreme' sports. Sportsmen and women must attempt to iron in the most extreme conditions, combining the dangers of 'adrenaline' sports with the satisfaction of pressed linen.

The British team beat extreme ironists from all over the globe. Runners up included a German competitor ironing whilst snorkeling in Malta and a pair of South Africans combining ironing and BMX bicycle racing.

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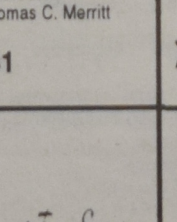

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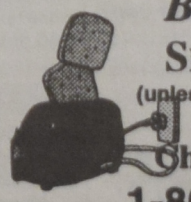

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DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION

Christian Courier is published on alternate Mondays. Copy deadline for each issue is 8:30 a.m. Tuesday, nine business days prior to publication.

RATES

All personal and family announcements: $16.00 per column inch (pci) + GST (columns are two inches wide). Display advertising re.: businesses and organizations: minimum $18.20 pci + GST, depending on design and frequency.

PHOTOS

There is a processing fee of $25 for the inclusion of a photograph with a personal or family announcement. Photo space is not charged pci, but we reserve the right to determine published photo size. Please note that we cannot use a faxed photo. We need either an original (which we will return) or a downloadable Internet image.

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We offer a $25 one-year subscription to couples whose wedding is announced in *Christian Courier* and to parents who announce the birth of a child in our paper. Please let us know when placing your ad that you want to take advantage of this offer.

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b) Please provide us with clear copy. *Christian Courier* is not responsible for any errors due to hand written or phoned-in advertisements.

Christmas Greetings

Holland Christian Homes,
7900 McLaughlin Rd. S,
Brampton, Ont.
Wishing you a happy Christmas Season and God's blessing for the year 2002

from:

Mrs. Sandra Posthumus
Trinity Tower #208

P. Veenstra
Trinity Tower #116

Johanne Kienecker
Hope Tower #206

Pete & Jenny Hensen
Hope Tower #502

Tieny Den Otter
Providence Tower #305

Birthday

Great is Thy Faithfulness!
With thanksgiving and praise to God, we announce the 90th birthday of our mother, grandmother and great-grandmother

Hendrika Johanna Van Geest

May the Lord continue to bless you, mother. With love from all of us.
Lane & Sya
Adrian & Jean
Evelyn & Albert
Willi
Ria & Hans
Corrie
Anne & Karl
Jack
Lambert & Donna
Dick & Marg
33 grandchildren and 36 great-grandchildren.
Open House on December 22, 2001 at Covenant Christian Reformed Church, 278 Parnell Rd., St. Catharines, Ont. from 2:30 - 4:30 p.m.
Address: 2 White St., Apt. 108, St. Catharines, ON L2N 1Z2

Anniversaries

1951 December 27 2001
With thanks to God
COBIE and HENRY DE BOLSTER
with their children and grandchildren:
Geri & Marty Van Engen
Michelle, Ryan
Bert & Jane De Bolster
Stephanie & Scott, Robert, Rebecca, Derrick
Nellie & Andy Straatsma
Peter, Jeremy, Jennifer
Len & Elaine De Bolster
Rachel, Stephen, Allyson
Joanne & Jim Teeuwsen
Teresa, Anthony, Jessica
hope to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary on December 27, 2001.
You are cordially invited to share this special occasion at an Open House on December 29, 2001, D.V., from 2 - 4 p.m. at Mount Hamilton Christian Reformed Church, 1411 Upper Wellington St., Hamilton.
Great is Thy faithfulness
Home address: 7 Bellstone Lane, Mount Hope, ON L0R 1W0

1956 December 22 2001
With joy and gratitude to our Heavenly Father for His care and faithfulness, we are pleased to announce the 45th wedding anniversary of our dear parents and grandparents

JIM and ALICE KOOISTRA
(nee. VanderMeulen)

May the Lord continue to "bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace." (Numbers 6:24-26)
Congratulations, Mom and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa!
With love from your children and grandchildren:
Bill & Rita — Williamsburg
Megan, Alyssa, Kayla
Wilma & John — Trenton
Lawrence, Sara, Bethany, Jenna
Trudy & Martin — Williamsburg
Milton — Toronto
We welcome you to celebrate this joyous occasion with us at an Open House on December 22, 2001 from 2:00 - 5:00 p.m. at their home.
Best wishes only.
Home address: R.R.1, Williamsburg, ON K0C 2H0

Anniversaries

Congratulations to Bill & Marijke Boonstra on their 50th wedding anniversary.

1951 December 14 2001
BILL and MARIJKE BOONSTRA
(nee Veenstra)

"We always thank God for you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thess. 1:2,3)
With praise to God, we announce the 50th anniversary of our parents. We thank God that they have been a blessing and an inspiration to us, and we wish them many more years together.
Rudy & Jane Ouwehand
Rebecca & Frank, *Matthias*, Deb & Brad, Rob, Dan
Peter & Greta Goodwin
Ben, Jeremy, Angela
Al & Gail Boonstra
Christie, Sarah, Rosalie, Charlie, Tim
Dave & Julie Boonstra
Kathy Boonstra
Home address: 312 York Road, R.R.3 Caledonia, ON N3W 2C5

Groningen Brighton
the Neth. December 20 Ont.
1951 50 YEARS 2001
"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Josh.24:15b)

HENK and IMI SCHUILENBERG
(nee Boonstra)

Congratulations Mom and Dad on this special occasion. We wish you many more years of love, health and happiness.
Love from all your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren:
Helen & Gilbert Huizinga — Belleville, Ont.
Ken & Wendy, *Corey, Danielle, Raechel, David*, Steve & Joanne, Greg & Krystal, *Grace, Emily*
Sue & Herb Uddenberg — Belleville, Ont.
Kristel & John, *Jazlin*, Jess, Cassie, Jody
Tineke † 1967
Johanna & Bob Jackins — Strathmore, Alta.
Emily, Bryan
Bill & Susannah Schuilenberg — Lacombe, Alta.
Tina, Amie, Melodie
Sylvia & Andy Draaistra — Stirling, Ont.
Corin, Ernie, Rebecca
Mike & Bonnie Schuilenberg — Carrying Place, Ont.
Teah, Kelly, Trevor, Esther
A family campout and celebrations were held this past summer. A wonderful time was had by all!
God is good!
Best wishes only, please.
Home address: 150 Dundas St., Brighton, ON K0K 1H0

Obituary

Andijk, the Neth. Abbotsford, B.C.
Dec. 23, 1906 - Nov. 1, 2001
Psalm 91

The Lord called home our dear mother, grandmother and great-grandmother

JESSIE KWANTES (nee Groot)

Her faith, courage and prayers have been an inspiration to us.
Predeceased by her husband Matthew in 1974, son John in 1998 and great-grandson Christopher in 2001.
Beloved mother of:
Harry & Ree Kwantes — Grand Rapids, Mich.
Taya Kwantes — Westbank, B.C.
Dick & Anne Kwantes — Manila, Philippines
Anne & Len Benschop — Wooler, Ont.
Matt & Dorothy Kwantes — Abbotsford, B.C.
Mary & Jack Dekok — Kanata, Ont.
Luke & Alyse Kwantes — Smithers, B.C.
Tina & Meindert Blink — Abbotsford, B.C.
33 grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren, also one sister in Andijk, the Netherlands.
Correspondence address:
Matt Kwantes, 2195 Mountain Dr., Abbotsford, BC V3G 1E1

Obituary

Born August 19, 1913 in the Netherlands and formerly of Ladner and lately of Langley, B.C.

RIEMER TERPSTRA

passed away August 18, 2001, a day before his 88th birthday, and found himself in the presence of the Lord.
He will be greatly missed by his wife of 53 years, Eke (Fokkema) and his children:
Sandy Karreman
Joe & Grace Vanderheyden
Sid & Sylvia Terpstra
Edward Terpstra
10 grandchildren and 1 great-grandchild.
Correspondence address: 6359 198 St., PH 16, Langley, BC V2Y 2E3

PICTURE THIS! You can advertise in *Christian Courier*'s Business and Service Directory once a month for only: $25.00 + GST

Obituaries

The Hague Barrie, Ont.
the Neth. Canada
Dec. 29, 1927 - Oct. 22, 2001

"Be at rest once more, O my soul. For the Lord has been good to you." (Psalm 116:7)
After a short battle with cancer, our dear husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather

JACOBUS (KOOS) HUIBREGT CHRISTIAANSE

was called home to be with his Lord and Saviour.
Beloved husband of Julie Christiaanse (nee Bijma).
Loving father of
Menna & Peter Friend — Shelburne, Ont.
John & Cori Christiaanse — Frankford, Ont.
Jennifer & Neil Jansen VanDoorn — South Junction, Man.
Trixie Christiaanse — Toronto, Ont.
Much loved Grandpa of 10 grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.
Predeceased by his first wife Maria De Vries in 1966.
The funeral service was held on October 24, 2001 at First Christian Reformed Church, Barrie, with Rev. M. Winnowski of Waterloo officiating.
Correspondence address:
J. Christiaanse, Tollendale Village, Unit G15, 271 Tollendal Mill Rd., Barrie, ON L4N 7S6

"We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him." (1 Thess. 4:14)
Peacefully at her residence on November 28, 2001,

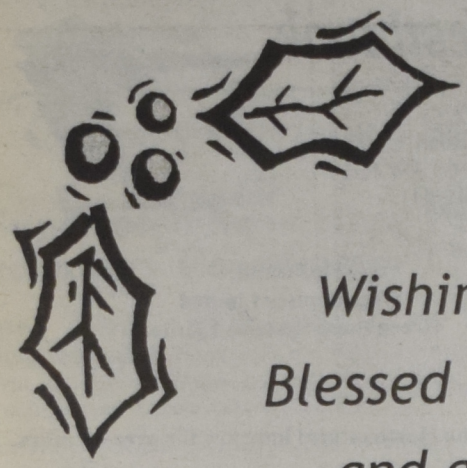
GEERTRUIDA (GERTRUDE) RENKEMA (nee de Boer)

went to be with her Lord, in her 86th year.
Beloved wife of Egbert Renkema.
Dear mother of:
Margaret & Bill Horinga — Woodstock
Corrie Clark — Neustead
Garma & John Markus — Beachville
Bert & Linda Renkema — Londesborough
Albert & Christine Renkema — Embro
Ralph & Shirley Renkema — Woodstock
Loved grandmother of 27 grandchildren and 9 great-grandchildren.
Dear sister of Janny de Boer of the Netherlands and mother-in-law of Tony & Joanne VandenDool.
Predeceased by a daughter Winnie VandenDool(1986), a granddaughter Carla Renkema(1980), two brothers and four sisters. Gertrude was a long-time member of Covenant Christian Reformed Church. Funeral was held at Covenant CRC on November 30, 2001, with Pastor John Jongsma officiating. Interment Oxford Memorial Park Cemetery. Contributions to the Canadian Bible Society or the Canadian Cancer Society would be appreciated.
Correspondence address:
403-600 Chieftain St., Woodstock, ON N4T 1S1

Call *Christian Courier* today to place your family ad: 1-800-969-4838.

Placing an ad this size will only cost $16 plus GST.

Christmas Greetings



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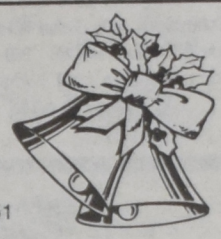
call: 416-461-1207
fax: 416-465-6367
write: **Christian Reformed Church Extension Fund**
45 Harriet St.,
Toronto, ON M4L 2G1

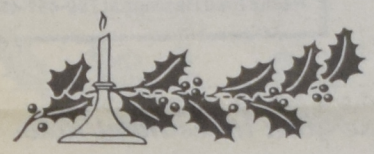
CRC EXTENSION FUND

Holiday Greetings

GVE

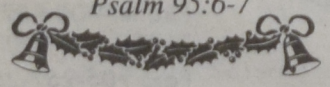
GARY VAN EYK, CMA
Certified Management Accountant
50 Lakeport Rd., Suite 201
St. Catharines, ON L2N 4P7
phone: 905-646-7331 fax: 905-646-0951





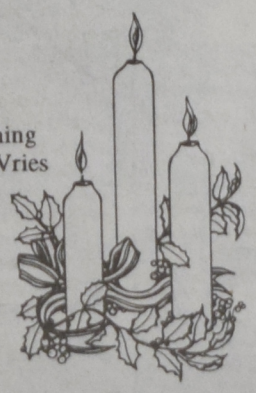
The residents of
Shalom Manor,
a Christian Long Term Care Facility in Grimsby, Ontario,
convey to
their loved ones and friends
their best wishes in this
Christmas Season
and for the New Year 2002.

Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for He is our God and we are the people
of his pasture, the flock under His care...
Psalm 95:6-7

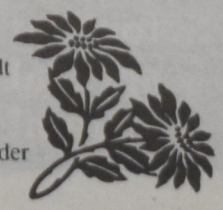


The following residents of Shalom Manor have requested that their names be included into the 2001 Christmas Greetings edition of Christian Courier.

Mr. Peter & Mrs. Karen Baarda
Mr. Uitze & Mrs. Hilda van der Wier
Mrs. Christine Sjaarda
Mrs. Johanna Winter
Mrs. Cornelia van Dyk
Mrs. Janke (Jane) Soldaat
Mrs. Anje Dreise
Mrs. Hilda Gerritsen
Mrs. Jacoba de Vries
Mrs. Margaret Zantingh-Ouwehand
Mr. Peter Ellens
Mrs. Pietje (Pat) Wybenga
Mr. Peter & Mrs. Catrina Slagter
Mrs. Dini Teeuwsen
Mrs. Pauline van der Kruk
Mrs. Jannie Kat
Mrs. Jurienna Hartman
Mrs. Jozina Huinink
Mrs. Meinsje Verwey
Mr. Peter & Mrs. Antje Hamming
Mr. Jacob & Mrs. Renskje de Vries
Mrs. Aleida Buesink
Mr. Ben Hofland
Mr. Gary Schipper
Mrs. Minnie Timmer
Mrs. Alice Oegema
Mr. Dick Geerlof
Mrs. Jannetje Kok
Mrs. Wilhelmina Dekker
Mrs. Aafje de Raaf
Mr. Heine Sietsma
Mrs. Aukien Zeyl
Mrs. Theresa Guther
Mrs. Ida Meloen
Mrs. Uilkje de Vries
Mrs. Martha van Leeuwen
Mrs. Annie Bokma



Mrs. Jacqueline Noordzij
Mr. Peter & Mrs. Helen Vink
Mr. Berend Jan Harsevoort
Mr. Andries & Mrs. Maaike Rijnberk
Mr. Gerrit Jan Roseboom
Mr. Clarence & Mrs. Jenny Rowaan
Mr. Bastian Smouter
Mrs. Anne Tigchelaar
Mr. Daniel & Mrs. Cornelia van der Steen
Mr. Jelle & Mrs. Tine van der Veen
Mr. Ysbrand van Keulen
Mrs. Anne Veenstra
Mrs. Trudy Visser
Mrs. Jenneke Tamboer
Mrs. Grace Woudstra
Mrs. Alice Smit
Mrs. Jenny de Weerd
Mrs. Lois de Vries
Mr. Arend & Mrs. Helen Lootsma
Mr. Pieter & Mrs. Elisabeth Poortinga
Mr. Conrad & Mrs. Margje Hagen
Mrs. Margaretha Oosthoek
Mr. William & Mrs. Adrian de Visser
Mr. Ed & Mrs. Lucy Jorritsma
Mr. Jack Huisman
Mrs. Antina Pool
Mrs. Tina Buitenwerf
Mrs. Johanna W. Schmidt
Mrs. Aaltje Jongejan
Mr. Gerlof van Marrum
Mrs. Liesbeth Colenbrander



Advertising

Job Opportunities

PASTOR NEEDED
Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church of Jarvis, Ont. is currently looking for a **part-time associate Pastor.** The successful Pastor must enjoy ministering to the elderly. Send inquiries to:
Mrs. Harmene Sytsma, R.R. 3, Hagersville, ON N0A 1H0

Job Opportunities

CHURCH ORGAN SALES PERSON REQUIRED (part- or full-time)
The successful candidate will have to demonstrate to be highly motivated, sales oriented and a self-starter. Knowledge in (church) organs a must. We invite you to e-mail your resume to **mail@organs.ca**

Jarvis Christian Reformed Church
is in need of a
CARETAKER
to start immediately. Benefit package and house available. Please send resume and/or inquires to:
Ebenezer CRC,
Attention: Mr. John Kloet Jr.
Box 239, Jarvis ON N0A 1J0
For more info, call John Kloet at: 519-587-4046.

Position available for **Director of a Youth Drop-In Centre** called Cor:12 in Wallaceburg, Ontario. Will be responsible for 150 youth and also fundraising. Job description available from
Wayne Dykema at:
Jwdykema@kent.net
Resumes must be in by December 31, 2001. Please mail resume to:
Wayne Dykema, 35 Chestnut Drive, Wallaceburg, ON N8A 3M3

Church Anniversary

The **Ottewell Christian Reformed Church**, Edmonton, Alta. will celebrate their **40th anniversary** in February 2002. We invite all former members and friends to join us at a dinner/social evening on Feb. 8 and special services on Sunday, Feb. 10. For more information/dinner tickets please contact:
Pastor Fred Heslinga at **780-461-4586.**

We could really use your investment now.

Your funds will be invested in Christian Reformed Church and Christian school building projects in Canada.

CRC EXTENSION FUND
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RATES TO DECEMBER 31, 2001
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write: Christian Reformed Extension Fund, 45 Harriet St., Toronto, ON M4L 2G1
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R. Vander Ploeg, Secr./Treas.
37 Brick Pond Lane
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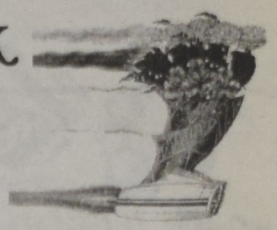
Phone: (519) 539-2117

In the Steps of Paul
Join a group being assembled to tour Greece next June to visit the places where the apostle Paul ministered, and to see the famous sites of ancient Greece and its islands. Our leader is a Greek evangelical Christian who is a professional tour guide with excellent English. Get details from Bob VanderVennen, phone and **fax 416-690-4774,**
e-mail: vennen@attglobal.net

Miscellaneous

Huntley's Used Christian Books at 114 Lake St., St. Catharines, ON L2R 5X8. We buy and sell used Christian books. Open Tuesday - Saturday 10:00 - 5:00. **905-988-9223 e-mail: books@interpc.ca**

Westbrook



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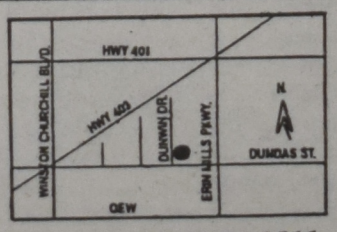

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From all of us:
Wishing you a joyful Christmas season and a happy New Year.
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Calgary Christian School

seeks a

Superintendent / Head Principal
Secondary Coordinator / Principal

Calgary Christian School (CCS) is a well-established, interdenominational school with 725 students in grades K-12. Due to growth and facility expansion, we are currently broadening and restructuring our Administrative Team.

Successful applicants must be able to articulate a sound vision of Christian education and be committed to working as part of an administrative team consisting of the superintendent, elementary, middle, and secondary principals, accounting manager, and development director.

Superintendent / Head Principal

A Superintendent is required to direct and oversee a dynamic leadership team. The applicant must have training and experience in Christian educational leadership and excellent communication and interpersonal skills. A Masters degree and experience in this field are preferred.

Secondary Co-ordinator / Principal

CCS seeks a principal with training and experience in Christian education and staff leadership to direct and oversee the operations of Grades 10-12. The successful candidate must be eligible to receive an Alberta Teaching Certificate.

For further information please contact John Messelink (secondary principal) or Anita Veeneman (elementary principal). The closing date for this advertisement is December 21, 2001. Please have applications postdated with this date.

Please send resume, a statement of faith, pastoral reference and how you will contribute to the promotion of Christian education and leadership at Calgary Christian School with references to:

Mr. H. Kielstra, Chairperson of the Board
Calgary Christian School (CCS)
5029 - 26 Ave. SW
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T3E 0R5
Phone: 403-242-2896
Fax: 403-686-1281

Christian social action in action

Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) is a growing alternative trade union based on Christian principles and currently represents over 25,000 members. We have an ongoing need for front-line trade union representatives, specifically at this time in Edmonton and Calgary, AB., and possibly in another location. Applications are sought for:

Staff Representative

CLAC provides an extended period of orientation and in-service training for this challenging position. The responsibilities of a Representative cover the entire range of labour relations work. This includes organizing workers into bargaining units; negotiating collective agreements on behalf of members; working with members and employers to resolve grievances and encourage partnership in the workplace; and representing CLAC in various settings as called upon.

Successful candidates will have proven people skills, possess superior communications ability, and be able to deal appropriately and effectively with conflict. An understanding of Christian principles and their implications for the workplace is a requirement. Post-secondary education, workplace experience, and analytical/legal aptitudes are desirable.

Respond in confidence by January 4, 2002 with a cover letter, resume, and references to Ed Grootenboer, CLAC Executive Director, 5920 Atlantic Drive, Mississauga, Ontario L4W 1N6. Tel (905)670-7383; Fax (905)670-8416; egrootenboer@clac.ca.

Successful applicants will be required to sign CLAC's Code of Conduct as a condition of employment. All applications will be held in confidence. CLAC provides a competitive salary and excellent benefits.

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Timothy Christian School (Rexdale)

has a definite opening for

PRINCIPAL

beginning the 2002 - 2003 school year.

Our school of 200 students and thirteen staff was established in 1958 and is situated in a northwest suburb of Toronto, known as Rexdale. If you are a Christian educator who has an active membership in a reformed church interested in leading a dedicated staff, we invite you to apply for this position. We look forward to assisting you use your talents and gifts in our school to help prepare God's children for service in His kingdom. Please send resumes (including references), a statement of faith and a brief philosophy of education to:

Timothy Christian School
Attn: Principal Search Committee
28 Elmhurst Drive, Rexdale ON M9W 2J5
If you wish to know more about this position please feel free to direct inquiries to Mr. William Groot 416-743-2554

REINDERS

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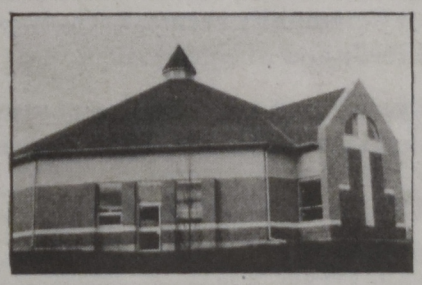

Hope Christian Reformed Church, Brantford, Ont.

We give thanks to God
for all His rich blessings;
for His keeping and His providence
over the last year.

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a joyful Christmas and a
prosperous New Year.

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Burlington Christian Academy, Burlington, Ont.

NURSING HOME ADMINISTRATOR POSITION

Due to the upcoming retirement of our Administrator, **Mount Nemo Christian nursing Home** in Burlington, Ontario, a 60 bed Accredited Long Term Care Facility, requires an **Administrator** to provide direction, leadership, support and guidance in our day-to-day activities.

Qualifications & Experience:

- Several years of experience at a senior management level or equivalent combination of education and experience.
- Superior problem solving, financial, oral and written communication skills.
- Proven ability to manage and direct staff and demonstrated relationship building skills.
- Knowledge of relevant policies, regulations and legislation in the long term care field.
- Ability to meet the Ministry's qualifications for Administrator.
- Applicants with a Reformed heritage are encouraged to apply.

Please send your resume and cover letter to:
Vice Chairman of the Board
c/o Mount Nemo Christian Nursing Home
4486 Guelph Line
R.R. #2
Milton, Ontario, L9T 2X6
Fax: 905-335-3699

Teachers

AYLMER, ONT.:
Immanuel Christian School, Aylmer, has a definite opening for **Grade 5/ Intermediate French** due to a maternity leave from March to June 2002. Position has the possibility of extending into the 2002-03 school year.
If interested, please call the school at: **519-773-8476.** Send resumes to:
Immanuel Christian School
75 Caverly Rd., Aylmer, ON
N5H 2P6
Att.: Marianne Vangoor

Church News

Any student from **Classis Chatham** who has applied to Calvin Seminary or its S.P.M.C. Program for the purpose of full-time ministry in the CRC and who is in need of financial assistance for the coming academic year, is asked to request application forms from **Rev. Michael Bootsma, R.R.#2, Blenheim, Ontario N0P 1A0**. The completed application forms must be received no later than **March 1, 2002** in order for the application to be processed. First time applicants should reserve the evening of **March 28/02** for an interview with the Committee.

SEKOLAH PELITA HARAPAN INDONESIA

A private Interdenominational Christian Foundation in Jakarta, Indonesia is accepting applications for the school year 2002-2003. Start date July 22nd, 2002.
With three campuses expanding and two more expected to open in July 2002, the demand for our style of Christian education has caused enrolment to skyrocket. Currently over 1500 students attend our schools in Grades Pre School, and K-12. We offer a safe and caring environment for our students and teachers.

We are accepting applications immediately. It is our intent to interview in Ontario and British Columbia in early January and late February. We have many Canadian Christians on staff.

Vacancies will exist in most areas in July 2002 because of our two new schools in Irian Jaya.

S.P.H. is the first National School in Indonesia to offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma. We also are in the process of implementing the Middle Years Programme and the Primary Years Primary Years Programme of I.B.

Please visit our web site at www.sph.edu

Initially individual inquiries should be made by contacting Hugh Mawby at coachem@hotmail.com

All inquiries will be acknowledged.
Application forms will be sent to all interested applicants.

We wish you a Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year!

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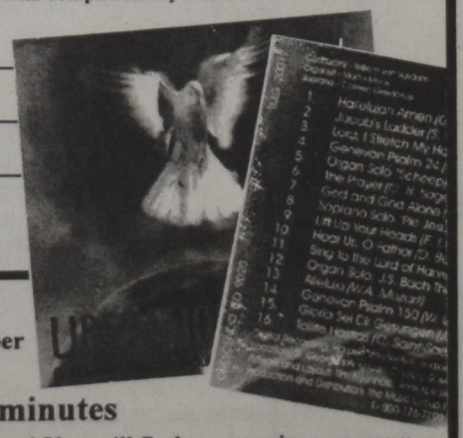

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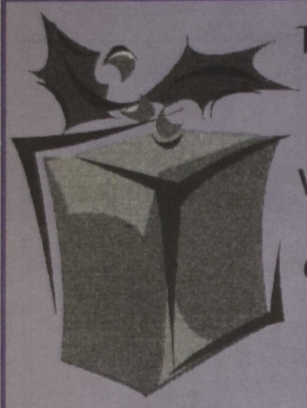
Christmas Greetings



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Ben Vanderlugt, Executive Director

Best Wishes for a Happy and Blessed Christmas

From
Brian and Kathie Bezemer
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and all of us at
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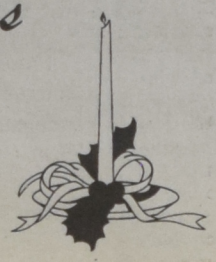

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And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...
John 1:14a

May the reality of the Incarnation be the source of your celebration this Christmas!

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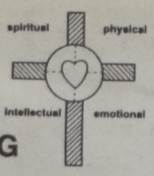

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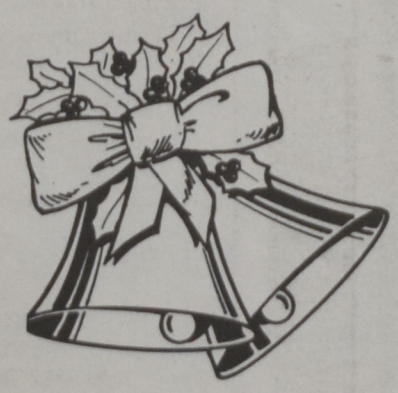
May the peace and love of Christ be with you during Christmas.
Happy New Year!



Holiday Greetings

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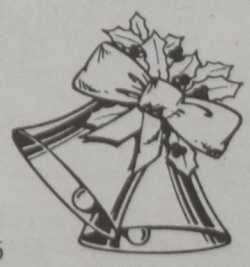

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The board and staff at OACS extend the joy and peace we share in celebrating the birth of Christ our Lord and Savior.

"... in Him all things hold together." Col. 1:17

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The board and staff of Citizens for Public Justice wish you a blessed Christmas and a happy New Year!

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